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Sociology's "One Law": Moral Statistics, Modernity, Religion, and German Nationalism in the Suicide Studies of Adolf Wagner and Alexander von Oettingen

Abstract

From the onset, moral statistics were influenced by religious discourse. During the nineteenth century, Adolf Wagner discovered the "One Law" of sociology: Protestants always kill themselves more often than Catholics. Deployed by his colleague, the Baltic nationalist theologian Alexander von Oettingen, it became a moral-statistical plank in the modernity thesis and supported a Prussian master narrative of history. Accordingly, it justified the unification of Germany according to the small German model of a Kulturnation excluding Catholic Austria. This interpretation, in turn, influenced subsequent generations of German sociologists, who described modernity in idealist and spiritual terms. In this, they differed from the more mechanistic and materialist theories of French sociologists, in particular Émile Durkheim.

There is a well-known dictum that statistics are never value-free. The moment a question is raised for statistical measurement, it is presumed worth measuring. Nineteenth-century bureaucratic states shared a common interest in the power of demographic statistics with the nascent discipline of sociology. National governments employed statisticians to monitor their populations and recommend policies that might improve growth, viewed as inherently positive. For their part, early charters of social policy vetted their professional credentials by citing statistics as objective scientific measures of social values in the service of the state. Both parties partook of essential certitudes, the chief being the enlightened principle of the common weal, an ultimate good achieved in pursuit of national interests as expressions of the popular will of the majority. Not surprisingly, distinct ideological strands of sociological interpretation gradually became enshrined in national schools of thought.

The collation of national suicide statistics (still promulgated by the World Health Organization¹) accompanied the process from the start. Suicide data captured the attention of a wider public as no other area of statistical expression. On the one hand, the subject lent itself to easy quantification of objective categories—gender, profession, season, method, etc.—allowing not only for

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meticulous collection of obvious social ‘facts’ surrounding individual cases, but also for straight-forward comparative analysis: A man is not a woman, Winter not Summer, hanging not drowning. On the other hand, measuring the sensational and disturbing self-negation of life lent the otherwise arduous, dry, and often lengthy statistical process a hint of prurient interest. In an age poised to cut the chains of the ancient régime and grapple with anxieties of industrialized modernity, suicide statistics seemed to offer a scientific key to unlock the innermost workings of the human soul.

Suicide statistics proffered objectifiable evidence to evaluate nagging questions about human identity and free-will at a time when some contemporaries viewed society almost as mechanistically as its novel modes of production.² Not so immediately obvious (at least to us perhaps) was the extent to which other professedly secular sociologists and social psychologists built upon pre-existing moral, spiritual, and religious debates. For example, Émile Durkheim is often credited with establishing the so-called “One Law of Sociology” or “Durkheim's Law”: Protestants always kill themselves more often than Catholics.³ Like so many aspects of his research, that particular observation derives from the work of others, in this case the moral statisticians Adolf Wagner and his colleague Alexander von Oettingen.⁴ Their views, in turn, arose in the context of the nineteenth-century debate over modernity, German unification and national identity, with its overtly religious overtones.

Ideologies impinged on statistical demography since the earliest work of John Graunt in his *Natural and Political Observations upon the Bills of Mortality* (1662).⁵ Graunt's eye for Baconian natural history and epidemiology (e.g. disease, birth vs. death rates, the potential for a male/female population imbalance through war) focused keenly on population increase as a reason-of-state policy. In addition to his statistical analysis of natural influences on population growth, Graunt also pondered behavioral factors. For example, he initiated what became a long-standing debate on marriage, specifically the pros and cons of polygamy. He cited examples from animal husbandry, livestock breeding and the herd instinct to provocatively argue by analogy against polygamous marriages—e.g. those practiced by Muslims—which did not necessarily foster population growth. From this he inferred the demographic superiority of Christian morality as a moderating behavior behind positive growth. From its very inception, therefore, demographic record-keeping infused Christian morality into statistics as an arbiter of social norms and values in the service of European states. By the nineteenth century, such behavioral measurements became widely known as moral statistics.

The first comprehensive history of moral statistics was written by a professor of evangelical theology at the Estonian University of Dorpat (Tartu), Alexander von Oettingen (1827-1905). Founded in 1632 by Gustavus Adolphus, nineteenth-century Dorpat University was a hotbed of German nationalism. It also retained a strong Lutheran tradition and, especially during the nineteenth century, theology remained its strongest faculty.⁶ From 1802 to 1893, the primary language of instruction was German, as were the majority of the faculty, being either Baltic Germans from distinguished local families (like Oettingen) or outsiders (like Wagner), who came directly from Germany, not infrequently in a state of quasi-academic exile.⁷ Dorpat intellectuals lived within the boundaries of Czarist Russia, but were partisans of Hegelian historical

dialecticism and the transcendental idealism of Schelling. Their influence upon generations of neighboring Scandinavian and Russian nationalists and scholars matched their own romantic yearnings for repatriation into a German-speaking empire, which had once stretched beyond the Memel into the Baltic colonies of the Teutonic Order and the cities of the Hanseatic League.⁸

Oettingen's history of moral statistics appeared in a lengthy 1868 study.⁹ Its title and the subtitle of volume one illuminated Oettingen's programmatic trajectory: *Moral Statistics: Inductive Proof of the Regularity of the Moral Life-Rhythms in the Organism of Humanity, volume I, Moral statistics and Christian Moral Teachings: Attempt at a Social Ethics on an Empirical Basis*. Clearly, as late as the second-half of the nineteenth century, Christian morality and an organic interpretation of society continued to pervade work on suicide.

According to Oettingen's history of statistics, Johann Peter Süssmilch (1707-1787) takes pride of place as the founder of "a [type of—DL] moral statistics," an accolade later echoed by none other than Durkheim.¹⁰ Whether Süssmilch (who counted Kant and Lessing among his personal correspondents) actually deserves 'founding-father' status for inventing moral statistics remains controversial.¹¹ More relevant to our discussion is his position on human behavior in relation to Christian morality as a contributing factor in population growth and, equally, the economic health of the state.

A Lutheran pastor from the Pietist University of Halle, Süssmilch was subsequently inducted into the Prussian Academy of Sciences for work in statistical demographics. His *Divine Order in the Circumstances of Human Sex, Birth, Death and Reproduction* (Berlin, 1741) argued for advantages of a Christian moral economy to increase population in the service of the Prussian state.¹² The demographic model in Süssmilch's *Divine Order* combined mercantilist economic theory and evangelical theology.¹³ Ostensibly, since state power and prosperity ultimately depended upon the number of its subjects and their annual rate of increase, he directed states to follow Luther's biblical imperative in their demographic policy: "Be fruitful and multiply."¹⁴

In reference to Süssmilch, the British historian of statistics Ian Hacking deploys Foucault's concept "biopolitics" to refer to the apparent confluence of interests between the bodies of subjects and the social body of the state.¹⁵ Empirically, we can attribute the almost obsessive interest of German territorial states with population growth to the demographic catastrophes of the Thirty Years War and the Seven Years War. Indeed, the term "*Statisti*"" had first appeared in a work by a Prussian scholar Gottfried Achenwall in 1749 to describe "remarkable facts about the state."¹⁶

The chief considerations of Süssmilch's *Divine Order* were threefold: 1. The natural inclination for the human race to increase; 2. the role of marriage and fecundity; and, 3. the positive balance of birth over mortality under normal circumstances. Through an examination of parish registers, he discovered that population increase remained constant over time, attributing this to God's *Divine Order*. Pastor Süssmilch also considered how immoral behavior (i.e., sin) impacted adversely upon growth as a manifestation of celestial displeasure, taking the form of a natural law. Apart from war, which he viewed as a vile curse, and impediments to general fecundity presented by divorce and remarriage at a late age (both of which needed to be controlled morally), he once again took up Graunt's theme of polygamy.¹⁷

Süssmilch consciously followed the model of Graunt for most of his study and even referred to Graunt as a “Columbus” in the study of demographic statistics.¹⁸ However, Süssmilch not only attacked polygamy as practiced in Ottoman society as detrimental to increase because of its reliance on eunuchs, but further compared Ottoman eunuchs to Catholic priests.¹⁹ He roundly condemned the Catholic doctrine of celibacy as deterrent to natural increase and a potential source of moral corruption, roundly favoring the Protestant policy of a married clergy. Süssmilch also confirmed previous claims that the rate of birth for boys was only slightly higher than for girls, a fact ordained by divine providence to correct later male losses at sea and in war.²⁰ Therefore, given the nearly equal numbers of men and women in the world, marriage (also identified in Oettingen’s history of moral statistics as the only legitimate method of population increase) became a sum-zero game. For one man to take more than one wife must necessarily deprive another, while for anyone to remain celibate must also leave another partnerless. Were sex ratios imbalanced, were there say twice as many women as men in the world, polygamy or celibacy would not be sins, but indeed might even be Christian duties.²¹ However, in reality, this was not the situation set out in the *Divine Order*.

127 years later, on the eve of the German *Kulturkampf*, which pitted Protestants against Catholics, Oettingen offered up Süssmilch as the harbinger of moral statistics. In an age when Prussia was seen by many as the legitimate heir to German nationalist aspirations, it should be recalled that *Sturm und Drang* romanticist authors like Goethe and Schiller had promoted the Saxon theologian, Martin Luther, as a national hero. From their point of view, Luther had taken an historic stance against foreign (papal and, by inference, Austrian) interference in internal German affairs at a time when Germany was little more than a cultural and linguistic notion. Germany, the nation of culture (*Kulturnation*), thus eulogized Luther for translating the Bible from Latin into the German vernacular.

In the traditional evangelical master-narrative of national history, the Borussian (i.e., Prussian) school juxtaposed the small German solution for unification to a large German solution which included Catholic Austria. It acknowledged Martin Luther as a legitimate founding-father figure of the German nation. Here, Oettingen’s claim’s for pastor Süssmilch as the *Urvater* of moral statistics fit brilliantly. And the claim was not entirely inimical to the facts; an entire generation of German Pietists and their associates figured among the earliest students of social, psychological, and psychiatric behavior in the late eighteenth- and early-nineteenth century Germany (e.g., Karl Philipp Moritz, Johann Christian August Heinroth, Johann Christian Reil and Goethe, among them).

Whether or not we accept Oettingen’s claim for Süssmilch as the *Urvater* of moral statistics, there is at least one clear connection between his work and that of the first self-proclaimed practitioners of moral statistics in early nineteenth century. As Ursula Baumann is quick to point out, *moral* statistics tended to focus—far more often than not—on types of behavior generally recognized by contemporaries as *immoral*, such as suicide, crime and divorce.²² The Enlightenment recognized a link between the moral and mental faculties, while alienists regularly prescribed moral treatments for insanity. However, a precise definition of moral statistics remains elusive, not least of all because most early

practitioners were amateur polymaths rather than bureaucrats or academics. Certainly, Oettingen's massive contemplation of *Moral Statistics* offers little in the way of a succinct explanation of its subject. The *Oxford Dictionary of Sociology* confirms this vagueness, noting that the interests of moral statisticians included "suicide, divorce, mental health, illegitimacy, and abortion" as indicators of social pathology, defined, in turn, as "An early form of deviance theory, no longer in wide use, which drew upon the organic metaphor to suggest that parts of societies, like parts of bodies, could suffer breakdown and disease."²³ The values measured remained steeped in Christian moral casuistry and the effects measured "silently presumed their negative evaluation."²⁴

Officially, moral statistics came to life in the title of an essay by André-Michel Guerry (1802-1866), *Essai sur la statistique morale de France*, published in 1833. At the very end of his *Essai*, Guerry offered an all-encompassing definition of moral statistics:

Moral statistics, having as its object of investigation the mind of man, studies his capabilities, his morals and customs, his feelings and sentiments, and his passions. Thus it encompasses at once the whole of moral philosophy, politics, religion, legislation, history, literature and the arts.²⁵

Guerry studied law at the University of Poitiers and, after admittance to the bar, he was appointed Director of Criminal Statistics in Paris shortly after the Revolution in 1830. In this capacity, he compiled data for the *Compte général de l'administration de la justice criminelle en France*, a massive compilation of criminal data previously commissioned in 1825. Riveted by the implications of the *Compte général*, Guerry retooled them for his statistical analysis in the later *Essai*. Driven by the question of recidivism, he took a keen interest in the relationship between the various forms of deviant behavior reported in the *Compte général*.

From the birth of moral statistics, suicide served as the immediate and primary focal point. According to Guerry himself, "Among the subjects included in moral statistics, suicide is one of those which has attracted the most lively attention and about which there has been the most discussion."²⁶ Hacking suspiciously treats the centrality of suicide in early statistics as the product of apparently competing national debates, which were actually colluding discourses between rising groups of professional elites from different nations. In other words, by stoking international controversy over comparative suicide rates, statisticians legitimized their own *raison d'être*. Anecdotally, for example, Hacking interprets a debate between British and French medical scholars at the end of the Napoleonic Wars—which he rhetorically likens to an ideological extension of the military struggle—as an actual wink of solidarity between professionals across national frontiers.²⁷ In 1815, "a little salvo fired" first by the alienist George Burrows (who followed French medical studies during the Wars despite difficulties in obtaining them) attributed higher levels of suicide in Paris than London to a turn from religion which had literally demoralized post-revolutionary France:

Whether this deplorable propensity by the consequence only of recent political events which, having annihilated religion have deprived the wretched of its resources and consolations in affliction, and by their demoralizing effects

dissolved the social compact that alone makes life a blessing, is not easy to determine.²⁸

International debate was soon joined by the French alienist, Jean-Étienne Dominique Esquirol. Esquirol “took up cudgels against the egregious Burrows who had dared to suggest that Parisians are more suicidal than Londoners.”²⁹ Equally, by joining debate with a fellow alienist, Hacking implies that the two were in cahoots to establish suicide as an illness and thereby expropriate it (and by implication all other aspects of moral degeneracy) from the police as the sole province of physicians and alienists.

By the time Guerry entered the field, however, he was quick to point out inadequacies in his own suicide data. For instance, he correctly noted that suicide was no longer a crime.³⁰ Certainly, suicide had been criminalized during the *ancien régime* and stigmatized right up until the revolution. It is, then, hardly surprising if segments of French society continued to view it as such, or if it retained categorical ambivalence for some time thereafter. However, a better explanation for the reporting of some, but by no means all suicides to the Ministry of Justice was purely procedural and had been so for centuries: Suicides were only reported to the Ministry when the circumstances of death were unclear and an investigation had to be initiated to determine whether suicide, foul play or death by misadventure had been the cause of mortality.

As a former ministry employee, Guerry knew this and it led him to acknowledge that the limitations of his sources reflected wide-spread underreporting of suicide at large. Guerry also conducted the first-ever social content analysis in history, examining suicide notes on file with the Paris police to establish motive. His methods remained largely wooden nonetheless, limited to the tabulation of hangings, charcoal, shootings and the like, short of any qualitative attempt to analyze the texts themselves. Overall, apart from attempting to establish a link between self-killing and recidivism and to tabulate personal motives for the act, Guerry's study revealed patterns of an inverse relationship between suicide and homicide rates throughout France; whereas the North of France had higher rates of suicide and lower rates of murder, the South exhibited the opposite tendencies.

Guerry's *Essai* wandered through other categories of moral statistics, particularly crime and education. He originated rank-order statistics to demonstrate, counter-intuitively, that crime rates actually increased in areas of France with higher levels of education. Otherwise, Guerry avoided sweeping generalizations about any systemic implications of moral statistics, which he viewed as facts which should speak for themselves. Twice awarded the Montyon prize (in 1833 for the *Essai* and 1864 for his comparative study of Britain and France), he achieved international renown for graphic representations of moral statistics in tables and, more famously, for cartographic representations. The latter caused something of a minor sensation when he took his maps on tour, notably in France and England where they stimulated debate over the role of culture, behavior, and morality. However, he seldom speculated on the matter, preferring to rely on the self-explanatory and objective nature of his numbers.

In the history of statistics (and Oettingen's is no exception), Guerry is largely upstaged by his contemporary, Lambert Adolphe Jacques Quetelet (1796-1874). The Belgian polymath was awarded the first doctorate in the

sciences from the University of Ghent in 1819 and, in the following year, elected into the *Académie Royale des Sciences et Belles-Lettres de Bruxelles*.³¹ Guerry and Quetelet; two persons could hardly have had such different characters. Both claimed to have discovered statistical evidence for the regularity of crime and a petty feud ensued: Guerry (who wrote Quetelet to suggest a possible collaboration) received a public rebuff. Guerry was a quiet observer of fact with an eye for ambiguities. Quetelet was a public relations barnstormer who extrapolated widely to engage in system building. Indeed, Quetelet quarreled with other disciplinary neighbors, not least Auguste Comte. As a result, Comte had to re-dub his own systemic positivism “sociology” when Quetelet borrowed the term “social-physics” from him and employed it in a fashion which dissatisfied Comte, its originator. And thus, sociology was born of a feud.

One of Quetelet's chief contributions was to establish the “average man” as the yardstick against which all human behavior was measured. According to Desrosières, “the moral attributes of the average man [were]—an ideal intended by the Creator, and a symbol of perfection ... Endowed with every virtue, Quetelet's “average man” was presented as a kind of prudent centrist, who avoided every conceivable form of excess—for perfection lies in moderation.”³² This average or aggregate man existed *sui generis* beyond the individual. Quetelet's theory on causes (he recognized three: constant, variable, and accidental) fanned the forthcoming debate over social fatalism and individual liberty, which contemporaries likened to the classic religious dispute over Calvinist predestination and Catholic free-will.³³

Although Quetelet's direct empirical contribution to suicide research remained limited, his system heavily influenced Adolf Heinrich Gotthilf Wagner (1835-1917), a leading compiler of suicide statistics during the nineteenth-century. Wagner took up the theory of regularity in moral statistics and added his own theory of increase. Indeed, Wagner saw increase everywhere in the process of modernization and established a law of constantly increasing state bureaucracy still known today as Wagner's Law.³⁴

Born the son of an Erlangen physiology professor, Wagner received his doctorate in economics from Göttingen in 1857.³⁵ A contentious figure, Wagner's choleric temperament often involved him in running scholarly feuds which, initially, precluded him from a permanent academic position in any German state. Consequently, he took a chair at the University of Dorpat in 1865 and developed a relationship—as close as was possible for Wagner—with Alexander von Oettingen. From that time onward, he associated himself closely with Bismarck's policies toward German unification under Prussian leadership. Called back to Germany in 1870 to assume the chair of economics in Berlin, he promoted policies of unification and played a central role in establishing state social welfare under Bismarck (an area where his theories remain highly influential). At the academy, he became a chief spokesperson for academic socialism (*Kathedersozialismus*). His surviving correspondence testifies to a single-minded resolve to defeat opponents and detractors, including conflicts with even his closest colleagues Gustav von Schmoller and Lujo Brentano. In 1895, he became embroiled in a bitter public contest with Freiherr von Stumm-Halberg, a contentious member of the *Reichstag* and a personal friend of the Kaiser, who ultimately challenged Wagner to a duel.³⁶ Wagner was politically active throughout his career, campaigning for national unification, state-sponsored

socialism and, as a charter member of both the anti-Semitic Christian National Socialist Party and the Evangelical Social Congress, "W. then became one of the outstanding members of contemporary Protestantism."³⁷

Through the publication of his monumental *The Laws of Regularity in Apparently Arbitrary Human Behavior from the Viewpoint of Statistics* just prior to his departure for Dorpat, Wagner already possessed a reputation as a master of statistics.³⁸ Consciously locating himself in the tradition of Quetelet, Wagner set out to prove, from a statistical point of view, human behavior was essentially repetitive, but certain types of that behavior increased gradually with modernization, thereby admitting a systemic dynamic for historical change. However, like Guerry, he seldom attempted explanations either for the qualitative implications of behavioral types or the underlying causes of historical change, preferring to view both processes as simple social facts.

Part one of *The Laws of the Regularity* broadly considers the theoretical ramifications and underlying methodology of the work, whereas sections commenting upon specific types of behavior (marriage, suicide, etc.) are relatively brief. However, part two—by far the most extensive—is comprised in almost two-thirds by the presentation of evidence on suicide statistics from a fairly comprehensive number of perspectives. Thus, it is fair to suggest that suicide formed the main substance of Wagner's work on statistics.

This is not the place to examine his voluminous results in their minutia. However, the most enduring aspect of his suicide research remains his revelation about differential rates of suicide between religious confessions, particularly Catholics and Protestants, though he did examine available rates for Jews and Greek Orthodox as well. While cautious about some of his results, on one point, Wagner was unequivocal:

The result of this examination is hereby the following: Suicide in Europe is most frequent among Protestants, perhaps even somewhat more frequent among the Reformed than Evangelicals; among Catholics it is very much rarer, perhaps among Greek Christians even more rare; among Jews suicide is usually rarer still than among Catholics and perhaps only somewhat equally frequent or less frequent than among Greeks.³⁹

In his explication of statistics on the relationship of religion to suicide, Wagner remained highly critical. In particular, he was concerned to insure that his comparisons between confessions took numerous factors into consideration, as he tried to establish a level playing field by matching environmental contexts.⁴⁰ These included: nationality, ethnic group, climate, culture, education, economy, and quality of life.⁴¹ Wagner believed that the most reliable comparisons were made between different confessions in the same region, and here again, his conclusions were verified: With few variations, Protestants always seemed to kill themselves more often than Catholics. In his concluding remarks, he regretted the lack of proper data on Moslems and Buddhists thus preventing meaningful comparisons which might have verified his suggestions on the nature of the difference more universally. While Wagner did not attribute lower rates of suicide to religious doctrine, he did admit that consolatory rituals, such as Catholic auricular confession, played a role. He also agreed with the French mad-doctor Lisle that suicide is higher among peoples who exhibit a greater internalization

of beliefs. Wagner held the sober and rational teachings of Protestantism, as well as their higher level of education (*Volksbildung*) responsible for a more progressive and secular outlook.⁴² Among peoples with a higher level of outwardly ritualized religiosity, beliefs act as a brake against suicidal behavior.

Although Wagner couched his explanation in polite rhetoric, his condescension towards other religions is clear. Protestantism—particularly evangelical and reformed Protestantism as practiced in states like Prussia—he clearly viewed as more modern than Catholicism. And now, to prove it, there was hard scientific evidence. Naturally, this was music to the ears of those German nationalists who favored a small German solution to unification, to exclude the Catholic Hapsburgs of Austria, traditional rulers of the Holy Roman Empire. Wagner was cautious not to take his work to its logical conclusions. The actual implications of his data, though admittedly bound to attract the attention of doctors, psychiatrists, philosophers, theologians, and last, but not least, statesmen, was left to the observer.

However, Wagner never partook of secular fatalism and concluded his work on a transcendental note. After reiterating his most important findings, he returned to the subject of causality. At the end of the day, only God alone could ever actually know the motivations behind each individual suicide, which most certainly included acts of free will, even if Protestants killed themselves more often than Catholics. Years later, in a book review, Wagner expressed content with Enrico Morselli's recapitulation of many themes from his own work on suicide.⁴³ He also took the opportunity to praise his Dorpat colleague Oettingen for convincing him of his exaggerated reliance on mechanistic views of society and suicide.⁴⁴ Towards the end of his career, he attacked what he saw as low morals prevailing among urban populations in industrialized cities, where base materialism aroused envy and greed, especially in England and among the Jews.⁴⁵ In 1910, he supported agrarian land reform in favor of communal interests and publicly exhorted all Protestant pastors to support it as well.⁴⁶

Thus, our trail leads back to Alexander von Oettingen, Protestant theologian and author of a history of moral statistics. In his introduction, Oettingen heaped praise on Wagner, who (though they disagreed on many points, not surprisingly) provided a model for his arguments and a method for gathering statistics. In that area, the student had even outdone the master; Oettingen's final statistical data provided the basis for much of Morselli's and Durkheim's later works. Oettingen also couldn't help but recognize that the first self-conscious practitioners of moral statistics—Quetelet and Guerry—were products of French national aspirations and, as such, examples of the unifying potential of national moral statistics for Germany to follow as well.⁴⁷

In a subsequent work, *On Acute and Chronic Suicide*, Oettingen tackled the implications of Wagner's work on religion and suicide even more directly.⁴⁸ Apparently, he discovered the politically charged potential of suicide statistics after a speaking tour and decided to commit himself to one more short publication on the subject before embarking on a major study of Lutheran Dogma.⁴⁹ *On Acute and Chronic Suicide* raised a battery of issues which, by then, informed nascent suicidology and modern statistical sociology. As his title suggested, Oettingen recognized accidental (acute) causes, but the regularity of his statistics demonstrated beyond doubt that suicide followed long-term patterns which fluctuated little over time. The one fluctuation evidenced was a constant tendency

toward increase. This Oettingen blamed on the strains of modern civilization on mental health. As people enjoyed the progress of material comforts, they were liable to suffer ennui and become world weary through excessive consumption (*Lebensgenuss*). Oettingen too recognized higher rates among Protestants than Catholics, but the theologian argued against any inherent deficiency in Lutheran dogma, since it offered believers adequate tools of consolation, if they only knew where to find them.⁵⁰ Unfortunately, too many modern Protestants engaged in the pursuit of worldly matters to the exception of their inner spiritual life. Suicide among modern Protestants he likened to an infectious disease, with the evangelical religion representing the proper anti-septic, like some carbolic acid.⁵¹ As for the duties of being a Protestant, Oettingen couldn't deny a greater demand for sacrifices than among Catholics, "with their priestly life-insurance tendencies" or for Greek "orientalists." However, it was not only their superstitious religiosity, but also their impure culture, which differentiated them from Protestants:

Therefore it is understandable that the German, with his high culture and deep inner affective life, with his tendency to self-reflection and self-critique, carries with him a greater danger of suicide than the easy-living, sanguine Roman or the even less developed, less-civilized Slav, who only tends toward suicide, when licked by half-culture or if infected with nihilism.⁵²

Expressions of sentiments like these not only consoled German nationalists during the *Kulturkampf*, but also German émigrés and ultra-nationalist Baltic Germans living in Dorpat under the Czar among the Slavs. Ultimately, it proved a slippery slope from Wagner's scientific conclusions to the unfettered and pseudo-scientific cultural narcissism of Oettingen's *Acute and Chronic Suicide*.

Now, armed with scientific certainty that Protestants were more suicidal than Catholics and that suicide rates increased with any given society's level of modernity, subsequent sociologists (many of them, incidentally, German Lutherans) went on to establish the modernity thesis. Max Weber, Werner Sombart, Ferdinand Tönnies, and Ernst Troeltsch numbered among its most notable advocates. According to this thesis, modernity evolved out of the inner-worldly asceticism of the Protestant work ethic, which manifested itself in a *Geist* or *Spirit of Capitalism*, according to the title of Weber's influential 1905 work. In 1911, for example, the Lutheran theologian Ernst Troeltsch stepped in for Weber (suffering severe depression at the time) to deliver a manifesto in a special issue of the *Historische Zeitschrift* entitled, *The Meaning of Protestantism for the Rise of the Modern World*.⁵³ In the opening line, he paid tribute to Weber's notion of the Protestant spirit of inner worldly asceticism in stark contrast to the materialism of the modern world.

Even more emphatically than Weber or Troeltsch, Werner Sombart harped upon the relationship of religion to modern capitalism in *The Bourgeoisie* of 1913. He too opened his work in praise of Weber. In all three cases, Hegelian nationalism is openly flaunted in an historicist conceptualization of the *Zeitgeist*. We should recall this against the backdrop of German National unification, only realized several decades prior in 1871 after the Franco-Prussian War. Historicism played a major legitimizing role in the master-narrative of German unification as

Martin Luther entered the pantheon of German national heroes. The nationalist master-narrative on the relationship of modernity to Protestantism continued to influence sociologists and Reformation scholars for decades.

The apparent discovery of differential rates of suicide between Protestants and Catholics would be adopted by Durkheim with such certainty in *Le Suicide* that scholars generally refer to it (whether in agreement or disagreement) as sociology's "One Law." By embedding the behavioral variation of suicide rates in science, it now became possible for scholars to objectify cultural differences between Catholics and Protestants.

There can be little doubt that the work of Wagner and Oettingen on suicide, well known at the time, played a seminal role in the development of the modernity thesis and influenced an entire generation of scholars. Durkheim certainly incorporated much of their statistical evidence into his own work, along with that of the Italian psychiatrist, Enrico Morselli. As for German sociologists, Wagner's dry quantitative proofs combined with his Dorpat colleague's doctrinaire interpretation of the religious *Zeitgeist* to infuse a Protestant national master narrative of German history with sociological modernism. While their influence on Weber was indirect, their links to his contemporary correspondents, Sombart, Tönnies, and Troeltsch, are far clearer.

Wagner served as Sombart's mentor, guiding his PhD at the Friedrich Wilhelms University (today, the Humboldt University). Eventually, Sombart succeeded his mentor to the chair of national economy in Berlin. While we know less of Wagner's relationship with Ferdinand Tönnies (author of a quintessential work on modernity, *From Community to Society*), fourteen pieces of correspondence from Tönnies are registered in Kirchner's inventory of Wagner's personal papers, including a eulogy to Wagner published shortly after his death in 1917 by Tönnies.⁵⁴

Wagner also corresponded with Ernst Troeltsch on at least five occasions.⁵⁵ However, the ideological relationship of Troeltsch to Oettingen was far closer. Both figured as the leading German-speaking Lutheran theologians of their age. In 1897, when invited to review Oettingen's voluminous work on evangelical dogma for the *Göttingischen gelehrten Anzeigen*, Troeltsch accepted without hesitation. He opened his review by lauding Oettingen as an "honorable Veteran of Baltic Lutheranism" and throughout the review Troeltsch praised Oettingen for his thorough appreciation of modernity in his theological outlook.⁵⁶

In 1897, Durkheim's *Le Suicide* employed the subject of suicide as a vehicle to establish scientific credentials for the quantitative method. Durkheim proposed the now-famous paradigm of four societal types and their suicidal aetiology: egotistical, fatalistic, altruistic, and finally anomic.⁵⁷ In the latter anomic typology, modern social structures disintegrated individuals from communal support mechanisms leaving them adrift in a world of vast impersonal forces. For Durkheim, this was the chief characteristic of urbanized industrial societies in the West and explained rising rates of suicide there. Thus, the more materially modern the society, the greater its susceptibility to high rates of suicide.

In France, Louis Napoleon's rise to power through an alliance with the Church ended in a secular backlash during the Third Republic against Catholic anti-modernists. Many viewed high rates of suicide as a negative measure of degeneracy and the decay of public mental health in modern society. Durkheim and others, such as the neurologist Jean-Martin Charcot,⁵⁸ adopted a fatalistic

approach toward suicide and neuroses as regrettable but necessary aspects of material progress, albeit entirely lacking in the spiritual and religious connotations put forward by Oettingen and others.⁵⁹ For Durkheim, the contemporary scandal of the Dreyfus affair contributed to his pronounced stance on secular modernity.

Unlike Durkheim and the French sociologists, who relied more heavily on environmental, material and mechanical social explanations for suicide and modernity, German advocates of the modernity thesis tied their results closely to a Hegelian historical interpretation of the Protestant Reformation as the harbinger of German nationalism. Like Weber, Sombart's own engagement with a transcendental *Zeitgeist* caused him to subordinate statistics to intuitive interpretations of ideal types. He jokingly disparaged the French quantitative goal to establish sociology as a quasi-natural science *a la* Comte using a Freudian quip, referring to it as physics envy.

In this context, the "One Law" of sociology provided German Protestants with an internationally recognized—if somewhat perverse—badge of modernity. It was with noticeable envy that the Italian psychiatrist Enrico Morselli extrapolated a history of the Northern tribes of ancient Europe from classical works of the Roman authors Tacitus and Suetonius.⁶⁰ He noted their astonishment at the apparent contempt among Saxon warriors for their own lives, attributing it to climate and their racial stock. Above all others, "The centre of the purest German stocks is Saxony, the old and powerful land of the Teutons, and it presents a very high average [of suicide—DL]."⁶¹ Morselli's modern statistics therefore implied a link to Saxon history through their astonishingly high rate of suicide. And certainly, as the birthplace of Luther, Saxony epitomized the modern ideal of a German State. For Morselli, the remarkable success of the German national experiment was a shining example for Italians. In that regard, suicide represented a regrettable, but "... fatal tendency of civilized society,"⁶² a natural way for society to cleanse its body politic of weaker members.

Endnotes

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1. Available at: http://www.who.int/mental_health/prevention/suicide_rates/en/ (accessed March 3, 2012).

2. Émile Durkheim's doctoral dissertation on *The Division of Labour* refers to social change as, "mechanically produced by necessary [social] causes": Anthony Giddens, *Émile Durkheim* (London, 1980), 39.

3. See Rodney Stark and William Sims Bainbridge, *Religion, Deviance and Social Control* (London, 1997), 45–52, for a recent and piqued sociological critique of its invariability. The authors correctly identify the origins of the thesis with Adolf Wagner.

4. H.C. Erik Midelfort also identifies Wagner as the source of this dubious maxim in his historical analysis of suicide among early modern evangelical Lutherans in, "Religious Melancholy and Suicide: On the Reformation Origins of a Sociological Stereotype," *Graven Images* 3 (1996): 41. The skewed nature of the original and subsequent statistical tabulation of suicides by religious confession (already noted by Wagner) is the subject of two articles from the journal *Social Forces*: Whitney Pope & Nick Danigelis, "Sociology's 'One Law,'" 60 (1981): 495–516; and William B. Bankston, H. David Allen, and Daniel

S. Cunningham, "Religion and Suicide: A Research Note on Sociology's 'One Law,'" 62 (1983): 521–28. See also, Charles E. Faupel, Gregory S. Kowalski, and Paul D. Starr, "Sociology's One Law: Religion and Suicide in the Urban Context," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 26 (1987): 523–53.

5. *Natural and Political Observations Mentioned in a Following Index and Made Upon the Bills of Mortality ... with Reference to the Government, Religion, Trade, Growth, Ayre, Diseases, and the Several Changes of the Said City* (London, 1662).

6. On the reputation of the theological faculty, see Erich Donnert, *Die Universität Dorpat-Jūřev 1802-1918. Ein Beitrag zur Geschichte des Hochschulwesens in den Ostseeprovinzen des Russischen Reiches* (Frankfurt am Main, 2007), 90–95.

7. Two of Oettingen's brothers simultaneously held chairs at the university: *ibid.*, 47, 84, 90. In 1886, Emil Kraepelin became professor of psychiatry in Dorpat, another emigré from Germany.

8. On the influence of Wagner and Oettingen on Scandinavian and Russian suicidology, see Evelyne Luef, "Low Morals at a High Latitude? Suicide in Nineteenth Century Scandinavia," *Journal of Social History* 46, no 3 (2013): 668–83, and Susan Morrissey, "Mapping Civilization: The Cultural Geography of Suicide Statistics in Russia," *Journal of Social History* 46, no 3 (2013): 651–67.

9. *Die Moralstatistik. Inductiver Nachweis der Gesetzmäßigkeit sittlicher Lebensbewegung im Organismus der Menschheit*, vol. I: *Die Moralstatistik und die christliche Sittenlehre. Versuch einer Socialetik auf empirischer Grundlage* (Erlangen, 1868).

10. Oettingen, *Moralstatistik*, 99.

11. In Hugh P. Whitt and Victor W. Reinking, eds. and trans., *A Translation of André-Michel Guerry's Essay on the Moral Statistics of France (1833): A Sociological Report to the French Academy of Science* (Lewiston, 2002), x-xx, the fascinating introduction does tend to eulogize Guerry as a father-figure, relegating the highly original contributions of Süssmilch (and others) to a lower rung on the totemic hierarchy of modern sociology and criminology.

12. Johann Peter Süssmilch, *Die göttliche Ordnung in den Veränderungen des menschlichen Geschlechts aus der Geburt, dem Tode und der Fortpflanzung desselben* (Berlin, 1741). Here, I have used the 1761/62 edition.

13. Lars Behrisch, "Vermessen, Zählen, Berechnen des Raumes im 18. Jahrhundert," in *Vermessen, Zählen, Berechnen. Die politische Ordnung des Raumes im 18. Jahrhundert*, ed. Lars Behrisch (Frankfurt, 2006), 7–26.

14. Frederick Stephen Crum, *The Statistical Work of Süssmilch* (Boston, 1901), 6, 21.

15. Ian Hacking, *The Taming of Chance* (Cambridge, 1990), 21f.

16. *Ibid.*, 24; Mary Poovey, *A History of the Modern Fact: Problems of Knowledge in the Sciences of Wealth and Society* (Chicago, 1998), 308.

17. Süssmilch (1761), vol. I, 181–86.

18. *Ibid.*, 57; see also Hacking, *Taming of Chance*, 20.

19. *Idem*, 364–88. Graunt, an English Catholic, failed to make this connection.

20. Alain Desrosières, *The Politics of Large Numbers. A History of Statistical Reasoning* (Cambridge, Mass., 1998), 74; Hacking, *Taming of Chance*, 21.

21. Süssmilch (1762), vol. II, 281f.

22. Ursula Baumann, *Vom Recht auf den eigenen Tod. Die Geschichte des Suizids vom 18. bis 20. Jahrhundert* (Weimar, 2001), 220.
23. Gordon Marshall, "Moral Statistics," *A Dictionary of Sociology* (1998), *Encyclopedia.com*. <http://www.encyclopedia.com/doc/1O88-moralstatistics.html> (accessed May 4, 2012).
24. Baumann, *Vom Recht auf den eigenen Tod. Die Geschichte des Suizids vom 18. bis 20. Jahrhundert*, 220.
25. Quoted from Whitt and Reinking, *A Translation of André-Michel Guerry's Essay*, 136.
26. *Ibid.*, 121.
27. Hacking, *Taming of Chance*, 64: "I call the Anglo-French squabbling about suicide the beginning of numerical sociology because (a) there were numbers and (b) the numbers of suicide were seen as a moral indicator of the duality of life."
28. *Ibid.*
29. *Ibid.*, 65ff.
30. *Ibid.*, 76. Here, Hacking argues that the reporting of suicide by the French ministry of justice originated as part of a professional turf-war with the medical profession over whether or not suicide was a disease (thereby subject to the medical authorities) or a crime.
31. Stephen M. Stigler, *The History of Statistics: The Measurement of Uncertainty before 1900* (Cambridge, Mass., 1986), 161ff.
32. Desrosières, *Politics of Large Numbers. A History of Statistical Reasoning*, 77ff. For a detailed explanation of the mathematical probabilities behind Quetelet's calculation of the "average man," see Stephen M. Stigler, *Statistics on the Table: The History of Statistical Concepts and Methods*, 169–74.
33. On causation and Quetelet, see Stigler, *Statistics on the Table: The History of Statistical Concepts and Methods*, 51–65. On the religious overtones of the debate over free-will in nineteenth-century psychology/psychiatry, especially France before and after the 18th *Brunaire* of Louis Napoleon, see Jan Goldstein, *Console and Classify: The French Psychiatric Profession in the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge, 1987), 356–73.
34. On other highly influential aspects of Wagner's political economics, from American fiscal policy to health care and the NHS, see Jürgen Backhaus, ed., *Essays on Security and Taxation: Gustav Schmoller and Adolf Wagner reconsidered* (Marburg, 1997).
35. A good biography of Wagner, both in German and an English translation, can be found in Heinrich Rubner, *Adolf Wagner. Briefe, Dokumente, Augenzeugenberichte* (Berlin, 1978), 428–38. Suicide hardly figures at all into Wagner's correspondence, where academic debates, political controversies and petty personal conflicts with colleagues consistently loom largest.
36. Considered autobiographically in Adolf Wagner, *Mein Konflikt mit dem Grossindustriellen und Reichstagsabgeordneten Freiherrn v. Stumm-Halberg: E. Streitschrift z. Abwehr v. Angriffen, Beleidigungen u. Verdächtigungen; Aufsätze a. D. 'Zukunft' m. E. Nachw., besonders z. Duellaffaire u. Üb. H. V. Stumm's Offiziersqualität* (Berlin, 1895). Their quarrel was part of von Stumm-Halberg's attack on socialism. For Wagner, it indirectly contributed to his election to rector of the University of Berlin, while Wilhelm II subsequently distanced himself from his former friend. See Paul W. Massing, *Rehearsal for Destruction: A Study of Political Anti-Semitism in Imperial Germany* (New York, 1949), 127–35; the information specifically relevant to Wagner is found on 243f, endnotes 8 & 9.

37. *Ibid.*, 436. Years after his death, Wagner was transformed into an early hero of the Nazi movement; see Evalyn Clark, "Adolf Wagner: From National Economist to National Socialist," *Political Science Quarterly* 55 (1940): 378–411.
38. Adolf Wagner, *Die Gesetzmässigkeit in den scheinbar willkürlichen menschlichen Handlungen vom Standpunkte der Statistik* (Hamburg, 1864).
39. *Ibid.*, 188.
40. Stark and Bainbridge, *Religion, Deviance and Social Control*, 46ff.
41. Wagner, *Gesetzmässigkeit in den scheinbar willkürlichen menschlichen Handlungen vom Standpunkte der Statistik*, 180.
42. *Ibid.*, 189.
43. *Zeitschrift fuer die gesammte Staatswissenschaft* 36 (1880): 190–94. On Morselli, see Maria Teresa Brancaccio, "The Fatal Tendency of Civilized Society," *Journal of Social History* 46, no. 3 (2013): 700–15.
44. *Ibid.*
45. See Kenneth Barkin, "Adolf Wagner and German Industrial Development," *The Journal of Modern History* 41 (1969): 154f.
46. Unpublished speech, "Warum muss sich der Geistliche um die Bodenreform kuemmern?" (1910). The speech, along with a large number of Wagner's personal papers are listed by the Berlin Staatsbibliothek as lost during the Second World War. Fortunately, however, a complete inventory of the library's holdings of his private papers was already catalogued in an article by Joachim Kirchner, "Adolf Wagners Nachlaß in der Preussischen Staatsbibliothek," *Sonderabzug aus Schmollers Jahrbuch für Gesetzgebung, Verwaltung und Volkswirtschaft im Deutschen Reiche* 192 (1927): 147–55.
47. These comments appear in a later edition of Oettingen's *Moralstatistik* (Erlangen, 1888), 24, as cited by Whitt and Reinking, *A Translation of André-Michel Guerry's Essay*, ix.
48. Alexander von Oettingen, *Über die Akuten und Chronischen Selbstmord* (Dorpat, 1881).
49. Alexander von Oettingen, *Lutherische Dogmatik* (Munich, 1897), 2 vols.
50. Oettingen, *Über die Akuten und Chronischen Selbstmord*, 4.
51. *Ibid.*, 28.
52. *Ibid.*, 31.
53. Ernst Troeltsch, *Die Bedeutung des Protestantismus für die Entstehung der modernen Welt* (Munich/Berlin, 1911)—published in the series *Historische Bibliothek* by the *Historische Zeitschrift*, flagship journal of the German National Historical Association.
54. See Kirchner, *Adolf Wagners Nachlaß*; Ferdinand Tönnies, "Adolf Wagner," *Deutsche Rundschau* 174 (1918): 107ff.
55. See Kirchner, *Adolf Wagners Nachlaß*.
56. Ernst Troeltsch, *Kritische Ausgabe: Band 2 Rezensionen und Kritiken (1894-1900)* (Berlin, 2007), 501–7.
57. See Dominick LaCapra, *Emile Durkheim* (Ithaca, 1972), 156–71, for a useful explanation of anomie as a sociological concept.

58. On Charcot's struggle with anti-modernist Catholicism in France, see Goldstein, *Console and Classify*, op. cit. fn. 33.

59. Anthony Giddens, *The Consequences of modernity* (Cambridge, 1990), 7, describes Durkheim as the proponent of the modernity thesis with the strongest faith in industrial progress and materialism.

60. Henry Morselli, *Suicide: An Essay on Comparative Moral Statistics* (New York, 1888), 36. On Morselli and his classic work, see also Brancaccio, "Fatal Tendency," of Civilized Society.

61. *Ibid.*, 81.

62. *Ibid.*, 372.