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Suicide: Power and the Body

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Michel Foucault's work has been central to thinking the various modalities of power which operate in the modern state. In *Discipline and Punish* and *The History of Sexuality*, he traces the history of power matrices and how the body is enmeshed in what he often refers to as the 'technologies of power'. In this article, I have sought to trace a brief history of suicide and how it was more sympathetically understood in Ancient Europe; radically different from the universal condemnation it evokes in the modern legal framework. Exploring the notion of suicide helps one understand the idea of the body's relationship with its possessor within the framework of the modern subject's production-function.

While comprehending the discursive framework of power and its relationship with the body, *suicide* (as both action and subject) becomes an interesting point of analysis. The manner in which suicide was understood earlier and the contrast to its perception in the present, evokes certain historical conceptions of the body and the dominant power relations of different periods of history. Such an analytic will facilitate a more comprehensive understanding of both the body and the disciplinary power intrinsic to the modern state. But first, a brief historicising of suicide is necessary.

The Classical Age and Early Christianity

The deaths of Christ and Judas in the Bible seem to confirm A Alvarez's view that suicide was not considered a crime in early Christian doctrine. He explicates that Judas' suicide, did not compound his crime of betrayal, but was seen as an act of repentance¹—the *honourable* thing to do under the circumstances. Only later did theologians treat his suicide as an act that exacerbated his crime. Christ's martyrdom is the other contentious death. Though it is not seen as a suicide, his surrender (leading to an inevitable execution) falls neatly into Durkheim's model of altruistic suicide. For early Christian scholars (for instance, Tertullian and Origen) this move towards death was necessary since it was unthinkable that God be at the mercy of the flesh. This understanding was in tune with the discourse of suicide in Ancient Rome. In that context, suicide was not permitted if an individual acted of his *own volition*, but could be committed if the State was to give the subject permission to do so. Subjects could *apply* to the State and if the State found their reason acceptable, the act could be carried out. Even in Ancient Greek literature one sees numerous 'acceptable' suicides (Jocasta, Aegeus and Erigone to name a few). Depending on the motive, which was more important than the act itself, suicide was even considered a praiseworthy act which conferred

¹ One sees the repentant Judas even in contemporary films like Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ*, where his death is seen sympathetically, and his suicide the logical outcome of his repentance.

honour upon the individual. And on the contrary, if there was no ‘acceptable motive’ it was decreed a disgraceful crime against the State. (Alvarez, *The Savage God*)

Honour being associated with suicide is possible only within the altruistic model which Durkheim says existed in societies in which the individual was “*only an inseparable part of the whole without personal value*” (Durkheim 179). In such a state, the idea of *individuation* was rudimentary and there was consequently a strong integration of the ego/individual within the *social*. In primitive societies it was almost mandatory for the chief to commit suicide as he came nearer to death. It was believed that the protecting spirit of the tribe resided in the chief’s body, and would decay with the chief’s body unless freed at the opportune moment. This form of suicide was distinctive because of its *obligatory* nature since society *endorsed* the death of one of its individuals for its continuation.

But how is one to categorise non-obligatory suicides which redeem the individual; and in the last instance undertaken of the subject’s volition? These acts are closely associated with classical virtues like honour and valour. There are several examples of distinguished men from the Classical period who resorted to suicide (Mark Antony, Lucretius, Cleopatra). Suicide was seen as a *validation* of one’s life-principles, their actions enforcing the logic of “*what is called a good reason to live, is also an excellent reason for dying*” (Camus 4). The obligatory factor in such suicides was formally different because the act was after all of the individual’s own volition. One should recall however that if suicide had not been committed in the aforementioned cases, there was only a life of disgrace or exile to look forward to; which, especially in the Classical age was considered to be a fate worse than death. Hence, the choice wasn’t really of life and death, but the form of death—honourable suicide or disgrace and execution. Therein lay the ‘obligatory-ness’ of such suicide. This subject’s suicide was *not* an individualistic act; the honour bestowed was *socially formulated* and the act itself donned the form of a social compulsion. Hence, the suicide served to reinforce the dominant social *code*.

In such a context, what was important as far as the body was concerned was that the self-sacrifice of the body was possible, acceptable and would dignify the subject. The *body* was the *site* on which the subject could construct his/her sense of self—insofar as her *relinquishing the body* entailed redemption and veneration. One can identify a similar idea in the act of disembowelment intrinsic to the practice of hara-kiri (the Japanese practice of suicide by self-disembowelment and subsequent decapitation); the *ritualised aspect* of the act accentuating the body as the mediatory site between the subject and the desired honour. Hence, one’s *body could be used* to define oneself, and its ownership was not in question as long as it adhered to idea of the social. In other words, since the act of suicide reinforced the social code, there was no *overtly* totalitarian claim to his/her body.

Towards an Absolute ban

Whoever attempts to commit suicide and does any act towards the commission of such offence, shall be punished with simple imprisonment for term which may extend to one year [or with fine, or with both] –Indian Penal Code, Section 309

According to Durkheim, suicide was banned with the formation of Christian *societies* with the Council of Arles in 452 B.C. which declared it an act having diabolical elements (Durkheim 292). In the course of a few centuries, at the beginning of which, suicide was not considered a crime and was even allowed in certain circumstances, the discourse around suicide had reversed completely. The teachings of philosophers like Seneca who had endorsed suicide as a means to liberation gave way to the philosophy of Christian theologians like St. Augustine, and later Thomas Aquinas. Such Christian belief posited that this world was transient and eternal bliss awaited the sinless. Hence, martyrdom became the logical end of anyone who was baptised, since suicide was a way of avoiding sin which was seen as *inevitable as long as one lived*. This tendency culminated in the sects of the Donatists whose many followers were possessed by the desire for martyrdom, and would go to great lengths to *provoke* execution. Profaning the temples of paganism thereby provoking zealots, requesting travelers to kill them, and if all failed, jumping off a cliff in the presence of their brethren were some of extremes they went to.

According to Alvarez, St. Augustine was the first to recognise this dilemma of Christian belief, and his arguments against suicide were crucial in it being banned eventually by the various States in Europe. St. Augustine borrowed from both the Sixth Commandment (Thou Shalt not Kill) and Platonic philosophy to formulate his arguments. Hence, a suicide was firstly, guilty of murder; albeit she herself was the victim. And for the latter influence, Plato taught that suffering was *divinely* ordained, and the soul's greatness was to be measured by patiently bearing it. These arguments were synthesised to formulate the belief that taking one's own life was going against God's Will. It was this postulate that was incorporated into civil law. The final judgement to be passed was at the Council of Toledo in 693 A.D. according to which the attempt at suicide entailed excommunication. As has been observed, the ban on Suicide came into the existence as a collaborative law born out of the Church-State power matrix. In present times, though the punishment accorded to an individual who has attempted suicide is not as harsh as it once was, suicide is still irrevocably banned in *all* countries. Thus it follows that the body cannot in any circumstances be used to define oneself in the manner the altruistic mode of suicide facilitated. This implies perhaps, that under the modern State, the individual does not *own* her own body in an *absolute* sense.

The Normative Individual

We are now in a position to think the logic of the State's ban on suicide. Accepting that the secular State cannot draw upon the theological postulations of Augustine to justify their law, one wonders what internal logic justifies this ban. Since in Ancient Rome, suicide was allowed as long as it was a *rational act*, it seems an anomaly that in the presumably more evolved and enlightened modern state, it is banned *without exception*. One is forced to explore the possibility that the modern State has an uncodified (insofar as it is not worded in official discourse) conception of the *normative* individual within its functioning. This normative individual has the liberty to exist only within the space the State provides. Within these structured spaces the individual can define her *functionality* and *value*. But what she *cannot* do is to step outside the *clause of functionality* and render herself *valueless*. We turn

to one of Durkheim's arguments to explain the basis of modern society. Setting a contrast with modern society, Durkheim posits, in primitive societies the individual was *completely owned* by society, and hence society could *impose the sacrifice of the individual* when it thought fit. However in the days of the State there exists a new conception of the individual in the form of the "*cult of man*" (Durkheim 302). Man has achieved a *sacred status* and the dignity which is attached to him is not only beyond him, but is *seemingly beyond the state* as well. As long as his conduct does not cause forfeiture of the claim to being a man, he is invested with a cult value; the destroying of which is sacrilegious. It is this profoundly religious conception that forms the basis to many prevailing bourgeois values regarding life in contemporary society. However the *cult of man* only defines man's relationship to *the idea of the social*; it does not adequately address the State's intervention on suicide. The State being an actual structure with real points of presence has to have a more concrete logic than the one mentioned by Durkheim. It is here that one can argue that the State conceives the individual to have a certain production-function associated with her. This presumed production-function feeds into the *logic of capitalism*. Though this hypothesis can be countered by the fact that even 'unproductive individuals' like the disabled and the terminally ill are barred from committing suicide, one has to take into account that euthanasia for terminally ill patients *is allowed* in certain countries. As our laws constantly get modified to accommodate newer forms of individual freedom, one can imagine the possibility of progressively more states incorporating euthanasia into their law, but it seems unlikely that *suicide* will be permitted anywhere in the foreseeable future. It only follows that dysfunctionality does not fall into the discourse of the State, and consequently neither is the absolute right over one's own body. The set of institutional practices which fall under Althusser's conception of Ideological State Apparatuses are predicated on the logic of the *production potential* of an individual; suicide, an act which counters this foundational impulse, is necessarily barred.

Biopolitics: Fostering Life

However, the debate of the 'ownership of the body' is not the only medium through which we can analyse suicide. One has to also look at the changing conceptions of the *right of death*, or the operations of power with regard to death. In *'The History of Sexuality Volume I'*, Foucault traces the changes in the conception of absolute power from the ancient Roman family through the sovereign or monarch, to the modern state. In the Ancient Roman family the patriarch had the right to dispose of the life of his children and slaves. Since it was thought that he granted them life, he could exercise the right to take away that life whenever he wished. He possessed an *absolute* power over what was considered his property. Later, under the reign of a monarch, the monarch's 'power of life and death' had ceased to match the absoluteness of the Roman patriarch. The sovereign could exercise the right over life and death *only* at times when his reign was threatened by either internal or external factors. He had the right to wage war and hence send his subjects to fight, indirectly exposing them to death. He also had the right to execute anyone who transgressed his laws, as that was seen as a threat to his rule. Hence, his right over death could be exercised only when his *existence as sovereign* itself was under threat. Foucault sees this right as one that is definitive of a power that operates on the principle of deduction (*prélèvement*):

a subtraction mechanism, a right to appropriate a portion of the wealth, a tax of products, goods and services, labor and blood, levied on the subjects. Power in this instance was essentially a right of seizure: of things, time, bodies, and ultimately life itself; it culminated in the privilege to seize hold of life in order to suppress it. (136)

Modern societies on the other hand are not defined by this spectre of the power of life and death on the subject. Foucault sees a transformation in the sovereign's right to "*take life or let live*" (136) occurring in the nineteenth century. The modern state is one that operates on the power mechanism of *fostering life* more than anything else. Its main role was to "*to ensure, sustain, and multiply life, to put this life in order*"(138). Hence, the logic of the State does not allow it to *endorse* any form of death, especially not suicide. At least not on the surface. Death no longer falls outside its domain, *but is inscribed within* its structure. Or in Foucault's words:

The old power of death that symbolized sovereign power was now carefully supplanted by the administration of bodies and the calculated management of life. (139—140)

Death itself is beyond the margin of the State's power; the moment which escapes power's operations, albeit not in a political sense. However this is not to say that the modern state does not retain elements of the power of the sovereign. Like the sovereign, *the State retains the right of death* insofar as it is *only* the State that can advocate death; whether in the form of executions, wars or euthanasia. This *exclusive right over death* is seen in its extreme form in an incident occurring around 1860 in London, where a man was hanged for attempting to commit suicide²!

The Body and the Subject

Through the historical analysis of suicide, one is alerted to the larger discourse of the technologies of the body and the construction of the subject. In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault traces the transformation in punishment when we move from monarchies to disciplinary societies; in which the primary form of punishment is *correction*, rather than corporeal punishment. In the old monarchies, breaking the law meant challenging the authority of the sovereign and hence execution was imperative to not only restore order, but the very authority of the sovereign. This restoration and consequent 'unchallengability' of the monarch's authority had to be *made visible* to the public, so as to subliminally instil the authority of the king onto the collective consciousness. Hence, "the spectacle of the scaffold", or the public display of the grotesquely torturous execution that was meted out to a conspirer against the state(See *Discipline and Punish*, 3—6). As Foucault observes through such a punishment, both, the crime and guilt as well as the sovereign's power and authority was inscribed onto the body of the condemned. The complete *subjection* of the body/subject is manifest in terms of the violence inflicted onto the body. Through the spectacle what is

² Reported in a London newspaper, according to a letter by Nicholas Ogarev to Mary Sutherland. (Alvarez, *The Savage God*)

presented is that the sovereign *could indeed* inflict such damage on a subject if he so wished. Under the sovereign, the body was evoked only when the operations of power had to be made visible.

Foucault states that “*there is little question that one of the primordial forms of class consciousness is the affirmation of the body*”(THS 126). He posits that *before* the possibility of the improvement of the working class’ living conditions, it was necessary for a general *recognition* of their physical body. Till the nineteenth century, the discourse of the body was strictly bourgeois-centric, in which the continuity and well-being of the bourgeois class was to be achieved through a cultivation of health, hygiene, control of sexuality etc. This emphasis on the body would help maintain their hegemony over those whose bodies were not thought to be important, or worthy of recognition. The class-struggle in the nineteenth century resulted in the conceding/recognising of a body and sexuality to the proletariat. It was this body and sexuality that the mechanisms of surveillance looked to control. Thus, power, which under the sovereign was characterised by a *visibility* of the divine right of the king had given way to an opacity of the ‘technologies of power’ in the modern state. Power can no longer be *seen* in any form of ritualised executions, but as a subterranean presence enmeshing the body in the matrix of power. The body is caught up in a *system of subjection*, and its usefulness lies only when it is both a “productive body and a subjected body” (DP 26). Its effect is not something attributed to the earlier mode of *deduction*, but something that is *experienced and lived* in the manifold strategies that it is *exercised in*. *Subjection* is not sought by violence or ideology alone, but by what Foucault calls a “political technology of the body” (DP 26) which fundamentally relates *knowledge* to power. Power produces knowledge, insofar as:

...power and knowledge directly imply one another; that there is no power relation without the correlative constitution of a field of knowledge, nor any knowledge that does not presuppose and constitute at the same time, power relations”(DP 27)

These tendencies lead to the formation of a number of knowledge driven fields of study which would eventually become the official practices of medicine, psychiatry etc. Hence, the corporeality of the body was subsumed within a variety of discourses which involved the *production and subsequent control of the soul*. By ‘soul’, one does not imply the religious or metaphysical sense of the word, but the ontological entity necessarily evoked in order for subsequent control. The power/knowledge technology gave rise to a number of manoeuvres like the medicalisation of the population, public hygiene, deployment of sexuality etc to *localise* the control over the body/soul. The absolute law of the sovereign has given way to the decentralised form of the law which operates within the *regulatory administrative* apparatuses. These technologies of power on the body, is what Foucault calls the “*anatomo-politics of the human body*” (THS 139). It might be argued that these strategies of power which produce the soul, making possible the control of the body, are fundamental in producing the subject for the State. The body’s enmeshment within the matrix of power is the principle of the production of the subject in the modern State.

Epilogue: *The Trial* of Josef K.

The fate of Josef K. enlightens one to a power that operates only through the ‘absent gaze’³. Excepting the arrest, the Court never actually *approaches* K. throughout Kafka’s *The Trial*. It is Josef K. who wilfully goes towards the Court and makes the painstaking journey through the labyrinth of the Law, thereby constructing his predicament through his *own actions* as much as the seemingly distant Court wills him to. It is his own abstract notion of the law and *what he believes to be the centrality of the Court’s gaze on him* that drives his Sisyphean quest to clear his name. The power of the Court is effectively the power of the ‘absent gaze’. After he is arrested Josef K. starts to take cognisance of his actions *from the perspective of this external gaze*, thereby completing the dominion of the Court.

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³ This is reminiscent of the structure of the Panopticon, which Foucault understands as the principal structure of power in the modern State. The subject should *feel* she is being watched, whether or not she *is* actually watched. One also observes that the body or the physical attributes of Josef K. is never described in the novel, hinting at the effacement of the body which is characteristic of modern disciplinary power.