

The interpretation of suicide in the work of Enrico Morselli

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Abstract. This short article is dedicated to Enrico Morselli, a leading figure in the panorama of Italian psychiatry between the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In particular, the focus is on a study published by Morelli in 1879, entitled “Suicide: An Essay on Comparative Moral Statistics”.

Key words: Enrico Morselli, moral statistics, suicide, history of psychiatry, italian positivism

Enrico Morselli (1852-1929) (1) studied at the University of Modena, obtaining a paper on blood transfusions in 1874. After graduating, he attended as an assistant, first Carlo Livi at the asylum in Reggio Emilia and then Paolo Mantegazza at the University of Florence. In these years, he made contact with the best neuropsychiatrists of his generation, in particular Augusto Tamburini and Eugenio Tanzi, with whom he collaborated with for a long time. In 1877 he was called to the direction of the asylum in Macerata. In this institution, he was a pioneer in the use of labor as a tool for therapies and reintegration.

In 1880 he obtained a teaching qualification in psychiatry. He taught at the University of Turin, where he was also director of the asylum. On the death of Dario Maragliano (1889) he agreed to move to Genoa, where he remained for over three decades, as a full professor of Psychiatry, of Experimental Psychology and director of the clinic for nervous and mental illnesses, which along with Morselli it found a new arrangement and organization.

In the scientific field, his main works focused on neurophysiology (sympathetic system and epilepsy), as well as on neuropsychic pathologies and physical anthropology. He was also among the first to consider Freudian theories and actively participated in the debate on different forms of supposed animal magnetism and spiritism, always from a positivist and atheist point of view. His studies on suicide must also be mentioned,

with an analysis of the relationship between suicide and work, particularly in the armed forces.

He also contributed to the foundation of numerous periodicals. Together with Augusto Tamburini, Morselli founded the famous and still active “Rivista sperimentale di freniatria e medicina legale” (1875), offering fundamental contributions in the field of anthropology and criminology, in particular forensics, also intervening in famous processes such as the one against the bandit Musolino and that Murri in Bologna. In 1881 he founded the “Rivista di filosofia scientifica”, considered an essential point of reference for Italian positivism.

Morselli was one of the most illustrious and eclectic Italian psychiatrists of positivistic education and his interests ranged from philosophy to psychology, from neuropathology to forensic psychiatry, from psychiatric therapy to forensics (2). In particular, the focus is on a study published in 1879, entitled “Suicide: An Essay on Comparative Moral Statistics” (3) (Fig. 1).

Morselli embraced the philosophical culture of evolutionary positivism that had spread in Italy since the second half of the 1800s (4). Following the positivist and experimental orientation of the new Italian psychiatry and the reformist ambitions of psychiatrists such as Carlo Livi and Cesare Lombroso, Morselli proposed an anthropological psychiatry based on individual statistical-differential analysis and on the comparison between homogeneous groups. The compara-

tive statistical method of biological, ethnological and social components (Moral Statistics) was applied by Morselli to analyze the phenomenon of suicide (5). He reported numerous statistical data, combining experimental observation of clinical aspects with psychological and cultural states. His study seemed to scientifically confirm the rise in suicides in almost all civilized countries of Europe and the New World.

The author has defined suicide “a voluntary act that moves from a logical process, of which certainly in many cases the premises remain unknown; it is the extrinsic manifestation of a phenomenon of conscience that escapes, because the statistics do not extend beyond the external characters of the event, but allows the possibility to go back from the objective notes to the psychic objectivity of the event itself” (3). “un atto volontario che muove da un processo logico, di cui certamente in molti casi restano ignote le premesse; esso è la manifestazione estrinseca di un fenomeno di coscienza che sfugge, perché la statistica non si estende oltre i caratteri esterni dell’avvenimento; ma consente la possibilità di risalire dalle note obiettive alla subbiettività psichica dell’evento stesso”.

Morselli believed that the use of statistical methods could explain the deeper reasons of this social phenomena. The moral statistics allowed the collection of the social and moral facts, presenting them under a common denominator in relation to a series of variables such as sex, age, marital status, religion, etc. So even suicide, like every other social phenomenon, was the consequence of events which occurred in previous periods and complies with laws and specifications influences deriving from society. Accepting the recent theories of Darwinian evolution and social evolution, Morselli identified suicide as a sign of weakness and a waiver in the struggle for survival (6): “Suicide appears as a legitimate and necessary effect of the struggle for existence and of human selection, which operate according to the law of the evolution of civilized peoples”, “Il suicidio appare come un effetto legittimo e necessario della lotta per l’esistenza e della selezione umana, le quali operano secondo la legge dell’evoluzione dei popoli civili”.

In the essay, Morelli proposed a meaningful comparison between the act of suicide and murder or the criminal act. The Italian scholar regarded both crimi-

nals and suicides as degenerate subjects. The main difference between the two behaviors was in the environment where the action takes place. In primitive civilizations the weakest element was identified and eliminated through murder while in modern society the same result is achieved with suicide: “the criminal man to satisfy his needs will kill the other man or he will rob him; the other, in whom education instilled the sentiment of duty, will cut the thread of existence with his own hands. The end result is the same: both are inept, they are deformed, and they will exit the fight in different ways, but identical in effect” (3). “l’uomo criminale, che non ha di che appagare i suoi bisogni, ucciderà l’altro uomo o lo deruberà; colui in-

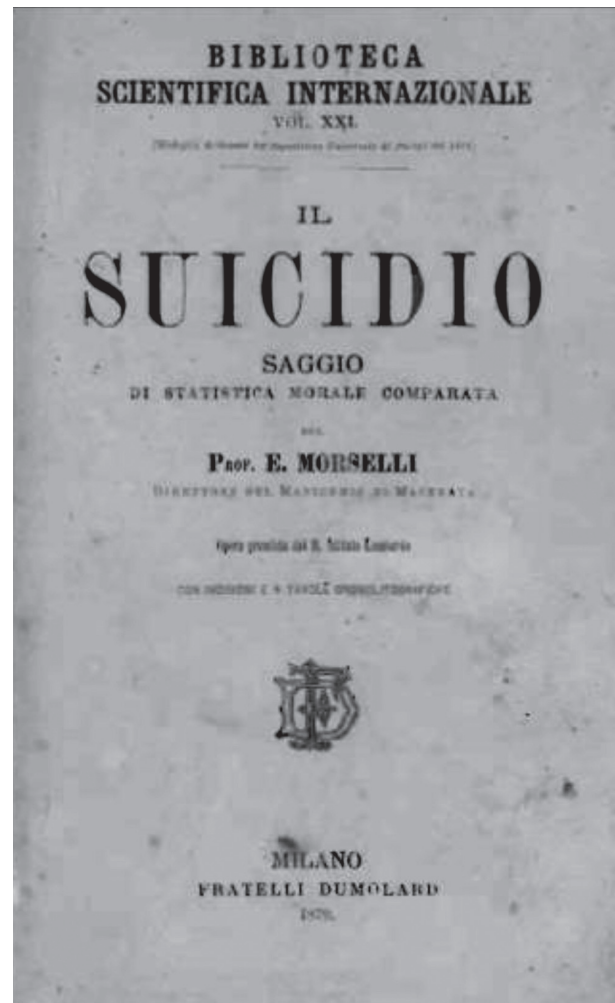


Figure 1. Suicide: An Essay on Comparative Moral Statistics, Milano, Fratelli Dumolard; 1879.

vece in cui l'educazione instillò il sentimento del dovere, troncherà colle proprie mani il fil dell'esistenza. Il risultato finale è il medesimo: ambedue sono inetti, sono deformi, ed usciranno dal combattimento per una via diversa, ma identica nell'effetto". For Morselli's evolutionist argument, crime and suicide were two different manifestations of the same natural cause. "If there were no other reasoning to show that suicide among civilized people is a consequence of the struggle for life," he wrote, "the inverse proportion it has to crime would be enough to prove it." Morselli continued his thought by presenting the relationship between crime and suicide as "the double phenomenon that occurs in civilized countries". Suicide analysis has taken on a social dimension. In particular, from the numerous data collected by Morselli, higher suicide rates emerged in the populations of urban areas. He argued that the regularity of a progressive increase of the phenomenon over time proved beyond reasonable doubt suicide, "the most fatal and apparently arbitrary" of human actions, was in "an effect of that universal and complex influence to which we give the name civilization". With regard to moral rules and religious faith, Morselli noted their considerable importance in relation to a better understanding of suicide phenomenon. He in fact started from the assumption that the human mind is strongly influenced by religious faith identified in the loss of feeling religious as a fundamental cause of the increase in suicides recorded in the transition period between Idealism and Positivism.

Another determining factor was education. The data collected by the scholar showed, in fact, higher suicide rates among the "more educated" countries and among the most educated social classes.

Morselli's work was one of the first attempts to provide an organic and broad treatment of suicide, applying the numerical-statistical method to psychological phenomena. It was remarkably successful also attracting the attention of Emile Durkheim who, while criticizing the research of the Italian scholar, used part of his statistical analysis as an empirical basis for the editing of his work "Suicide: Study of Sociology", published in 1897.

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