



Kathryn A. Sloan. *Death in the City: Suicide and the Social Imaginary in Modern Mexico.* Violence in Latin American History Series. Oakland: University of California Press, 2017. xii + 257 pp. \$85.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-520-29031-0.

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Death is part of the natural cycle of life, but human societies give particular meanings to this natural process. Mexicans, in particular, are generally assumed to have a jocoserious relationship with death and dying as a result of the global commodification of the Day of the Dead and its cultural imagery. Confronting death in their daily lives—or so, the cultural trope sustains—Mexicans learn to live with it, respecting it, making fun of it, seemingly insensitive to the tragedy of loss. Suicide is a different matter—not only in the human life cycle but also in the world of social relations and cultural meanings. Suicide breaks with the natural and social order. What has the Mexican attitude toward this act been and what can it tell us about Mexicans’ relationship with death? This is the question that Kathryn A. Sloan sets to examine in *Death in the City*.

Sloan’s innovative exploration of suicide contributes to an important scholarship on the history of death, funerals, crime, and violence in Mexico and Latin America. This scholarship has grown in the last two decades, but studies on the specific topic of suicide across different times and regions remain to be undertaken. Sloan does her part for Porfirian and early postrevolutionary Mexico City. Untangling the power relationships between the state and individual narratives of suicide, Sloan

analyzes the suicidal act as a performance, where suicides made sense of and evidenced the tensions between social norms and individual experiences. To understand the performative act, Sloan reads suicides’ bodies as texts and follows them in their preparations, the place of suicide, the hospital, the autopsy table, and their resting place, uncovering the multiple narratives of journalists and doctors, as they discovered and recreated the cadaver, corpse, scene, place, tools, motives, family, relationships, dwellings, workplace, and rituals of popular mourning.

Navigating a wide array of sources, including judicial records about suicide in the Tribunal Superior de Justicia, medical treatises, forensic reports, visual sources, suicide letters, literature, poetry, broadsides, asylum reports and questionnaires, and articles and editorials from newspapers of all political and religious allegiances, Sloan concludes that young people, regardless of gender, committed suicide more often than adults in the transition to the twentieth century. However, in response to the social and economic change that urbanization brought to Mexico City, newspapers formulated a “cultural grammar” that presented suicide as a moral disease of modernity shaped by women’s transgression of gender roles, men’s weakness in front of the demands of mod-

ern civilization, class lines and spaces, and contours of religion and secularism in a positivist era (p. 4). Individuals appropriated and challenged this grammar in the way they decided to terminate their lives. This in turn was captured by reporters, doctors, and newspaper writers. Individuals, society, and the state constructed this grammar, providing a variety of meanings to this particular form of dying and undermining the essentialist assumption of Mexicans' relationship with death.

The book is structured in six chapters. In the positivist fashion of the period, the first chapter analyzes the statistics of suicide from 1900 to 1930 using the tribunal's inquests. The author warns that far from accurately representing suicidal facts—after all, incomplete statistics say more about the values of those interested in measuring the phenomenon than the phenomenon itself—the statistics provide empirical evidence that Sloan later contrasts with newspaper representations. Using Luis Hidalgo y Carpio's *Compendio de medicina legal* (1877) and several suicide cases that the book analyzes further in subsequent chapters, chapter 2 explains forensic practices in Mexico and compares them to newspaper reports of suicides. Sloan demonstrates that forensic—and therefore, presumably scientific—language used witnesses' narratives to understand the motives of suicide, bringing cultural ambivalences about suicide to the dissecting table. Similarly, reporters adopted forensic and literary elements to describe suicidal cases, reproducing Mexico City's and Europe's widespread tropes about suicide.

Chapter 3 focuses on the analysis of the popular meanings of suicide. Sloan finds that the rising epidemic of suicide coincided with the rise of professional journalism at the turn of the twentieth century. The consequence was that suicide reporting moved away from political commentary and editorializing to factual reporting. However, neither of these approaches disengaged from the cultural meanings attributed to suicide since the Por-

firiato. In turn, these meanings exposed the tensions between liberalism and positivism, religion and secularism, tradition and modernity, and domestic and public life, and revealed questions about gender norms and the importance of education in conveying these values to youth, the primary victims of the suicide epidemic. For instance, an elitist Porfirian editorial could raise the concern that the suicide epidemic had reached the working class, sending out the underlying message that suicide could unleash the criminal impulses of the uneducated poor, while a workers' newspaper posed suicide as a disease of the wealthy who had been the beneficiaries of modernization. While newspapers became an arena of political, cultural, and social disputes around suicide, letters and testimonies from suicide survivors expressed their own personal reasons to attempt suicide: "*disgustos* ... Love had everything to do with it" (p. 102).

Chapter 4 examines medical views on suicide. Beginning in the nineteenth century, Mexico experienced a process of medicalization of the body and society. The rising use of empirical information to understand social issues and to formulate empirically based approaches to governance came with the identification of processes that delayed the march of progress. Through a social autopsy, Mexican doctors identified suicide as a sign of a diseased social body that required proper intervention if it were to give way to triumphant modernity. Mexican doctors lined up with individualistic and environmental explanations of madness, but they filtered these explanations through religious, gender, and class tensions of the period. For instance, while positivist philosophy supported the decriminalization of suicide—as opposed to Catholic religion, which considered suicide a sinful act because the person acted willingly—and argued that education helped control the passions that led to suicide, it also perpetuated physiological explanations that linked suicidal behaviors to women because insanity, and particularly hysteria and melancholy, was the result of women's

possession of a womb. The chapter explores how framing of mental disease was influenced by gender and social norms and how diagnoses that did not correspond to the norm constituted a critique to the particular individual or group. The chapter closes by exposing city dwellers' ambivalence toward diagnoses of madness and its treatments using questionnaires and reports from the famous madhouse *La Castañeda*.

In chapters 5 and 6, Sloan sharpens her interpretative lens and looks at the relevance of space and ritual. While at moments the narration of particular suicide cases seems repetitive, it is compensated for by Sloan's sharp insights into the relevance of space and popular mourning. In chapter 5, she argues that the people who committed suicide made a political statement when choosing specific public sites to die. The example of Chapultepec Park is perhaps the most illustrative. Located in the west side of the city, the park became a socializing space for elites during the Porfiriato. When Guadalupe Ortiz's and María Fuentes's double suicide appeared in newspapers, reporters linked Chapultepec with the amorous deceptions that motivated the women's deaths. Their case was seen as an honorable suicide of wealthy women betrayed by love. But when reporters discovered Chapultepec suicides' working-class origins, they framed the deaths as dishonorable. However, when Chapultepec was opened to the working class after the revolution, that space lost its class reference. Similar narratives exposed how suicides gave particular meanings to streets, cemeteries, cantinas, and the cathedral, meanings that waned after the revolution. Chapter 6 looks at "stains of blood" and how popular mourning at the sites of death contradicted journalists' intentions of keeping discussions and reflections on suicides at home (p. 176). Perhaps the most theoretically oriented chapter, chapter 6 draws on major works on the culture of death in Mexico and the anthropology of death to argue that newspapers negotiated with the public over how and why suicides' death might be mourned. In doing so,

journalists constructed emotional communities that empathized with suicides. It is telling that popular "manifestations of mourning largely occurred when young working women with aspirations of love and social mobility committed suicide in public.... The mourners ... produced an arena of affect and emotion where they could lament the tragedy of lost youth in turbulent time" (p. 196).

Thorough, well researched, methodologically appealing, and with a clear narrative line, this study of suicide is the first of its kind for Mexico in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century and one of the few works dedicated to the topic in Latin America. It is therefore an excellent addition to the literature on death and crime in Mexico City and an obligatory reference for scholars interested in comparative analyses across regions. The analysis provides a balance between medical science and cultural representations of gender and class. I found particularly illuminating the examination of the medical gaze on and the scientific and technological intervention surrounding mental illness and suicides' corpses and cadavers. The book will be particularly useful for historians, anthropologists, and other scholars interested in death in Latin America and Mexico in the modern period and a fascinating reading for graduate courses on the history of medicalization, gender, class, and modernity in the region.

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