

# Suicide as a Historical Phenomenon: Introduction to the Thematic Section / Samomor kot historični fenomen: uvod v tematski sklop

There are probably not many things that mark people more than the fact that they are transient. The division between life and death, between Eros and Thanatos, is as old as humanity itself, and while dying and death are exceedingly common themes, suicide has nevertheless been given a particular place and has had different connotations in various cultural contexts over the centuries. The thematic section at hand presents the studies from the project titled *Sin, shame, symptom: suicide and its perceptions in Slovenia (1850–2000)*, financed by the Slovenian Research and Innovation Agency (research core funding No. J6-3123), covering the period from the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century to the modern period, when suicide victims became viewed as patients and were no longer perceived as criminals and sinners. In the period starting with the formal decriminalisation of suicide and coinciding with the birth of modern statistics – which, for the first time in history, calculated statistically verifiable, demonstrable, and, within specific environments, constant rates of suicide – the perception of suicide changed. No longer deemed a sin, a rebellion against the Creator, and a criminal act, it initially became regarded as “the most intimate act” until it started to primarily represent a reflection of crises and societal circumstances. Suicide was perceived as an issue at the intersection of the sacred and the secular, of the philosophical, sociological, and medical spheres, of the urban and rural domains, while lawyers, doctors, sociologists, theologians, and others dealt with it from their perspectives.

In Slovenia, suicide has received a lot of attention, mainly because the suicide rate in the territory of today’s Slovenia has increased enormously in just a single century – from three suicides per 100,000 inhabitants, as recorded in the 1873 statistics, to more than 35 (and even more than 60 in some parts of the country) in the final decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. However, it has so far been treated mainly from the medical (especially psychiatric), forensic, psychological, and suicidological points of view, while the historical aspects of the issue have not yet been examined more thoroughly. In contemporary interdisciplinary research that seeks to reveal the origins of today’s

truths about the suicide phenomenon, analyse how these truths have been shaped over time, and demonstrate how these truths and beliefs have been reflected in everyday life, society, legislation, and people's behaviour, the historical perspective has nevertheless proved indispensable.

The contributions by Irena Selišnik, Urška Bratož, Jelena Seferović, and Meta Remec focus – each from its own perspective – on the period between the end of the 19th century and the first half of the 20th century when suicide stopped being perceived as a sin and became a symptom of degeneration that undermined the vitality of the nation and its power to resist the challenges of the historical moment. In addition to the multitude of the infirm, “the blind, the deaf, the idiots, the insane, the epileptics”, and the declining birth rates, suicide was perceived as a symptom of the deteriorating health of the nation and a harbinger of its imminent demise.<sup>1</sup> Suicide was seen as a sign of the deficient self-control and moral character of the deceased. Irena Selišnik focuses on the question of how suicide was perceived by Slovenian society during the second half of the 19th and the first half of the 20th century, drawing on autobiographical sources of the suicide victims as well as their family members, friends, and family, whose world was irreparably affected by these deaths. The issues of the contextualisation of suicide and the interpretations of its causes and triggers were also addressed by Urška Bratož and Jelena Seferović, whose studies allow for a comparison between the Slovenian situation and the neighbouring countries. Urška Bratož focuses on the media discourse and the social image of suicide at the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th centuries, especially in the case of Trieste as a prominent Austrian urban centre, where the increasing suicidality trend became more notable at least from the 1870s, while Jelena Seferović's article analyses the media and medical discourse as well as the medical records of psychiatric patients. Seferović, Bratož, and Selišnik have successfully assembled various fragments to present life stories that cannot be captured by statistics alone, demonstrating how the statements about the causes of suicide provided by the family members, eyewitnesses, media, and doctors differed according to the gender, social status, and even political affiliation of the deceased. In that period, the majority of the population was poorly literate, which is why they rarely left behind any written records of their lives and even less about their deaths. As only a few farewell letters were written, the interpretation of the causes was left to others. Meta Remec analysed suicide cases from the judicial records of the Celje and Maribor District Courts and a few specific examples from the Trbovlje Local Court in the first half of the 20th century. Her analysis reveals that court materials, police reports, and statements of witnesses and relatives represent previously filtered sources that express the pain, hurt, and anger of the witnesses, who most often tried to clear their names or point at potential culprits for the tragic death. By relying on such sources, we can learn more about the witness than the person who committed suicide, which is a significant drawback at first sight. However, these sources can also prove extremely valuable, as

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1 Samuel Alexander Kenny Strahan, *Suicide and Insanity: A Physiological and Sociological Study* (London: S. Sonnenschein & Co., 1984), 72.

they reflect the attitudes towards suicide and the cultural climate in different periods and settings, along with the tabooisation and stigmatisation that still accompanied suicide. Moreover, as these authors' analyses have revealed, these sources can also shed light on the social, economic, religious, and regional specificities and indirectly point to related themes such as women's position in the family and society, the prevalence of domestic and sexual violence, etc.

Historiography, which can thus shed light on the origins of today's beliefs and practices, can also provide another perspective on a phenomenon under consideration – for example, the prevailing Western view of suicide as a tragic accident and a tragedy that could and should be prevented by all means. The fact that the phenomenon of suicide used to be perceived in various ways in different societies – that it was not always seen as a shame and a tragedy but also an act of honour and courage – is often overlooked.<sup>2</sup> This can be gleaned from Ivan Smiljanić's analysis dealing with the concept of heroic suicide among Yugoslav and especially Slovenian Partisans during World War II and with the attitude towards these deaths after the war when they were formally recognised and consequently glorified and celebrated as heroic acts and the ultimate self-sacrifice. His analysis also reveals the embarrassment involved, as this concept raised difficult moral questions, such as the unacceptability of suicide from the point of view of Marxist ethics, the (in)appropriateness of one's actions during crises, and the limits of personal freedom.

According to the analyses, the people who, for whatever reason, "took their fate into their own hands" were granted only partial autonomy throughout the period under consideration, as it was deemed that unambiguous correlations existed between public and intimate crises. Each time, poor social conditions, recurrent economic crises, frequent changes in the state and ideological frameworks, feelings of insecurity associated with these factors, and, in particular, seminal events such as the two World Wars and the 1991 Slovenian Independence War, supposedly led to inevitable "suicide epidemics". However, according to the studies in this thematic section, when crises were real and tangible, their perceptions were often artificially created and fuelled, especially by sensationalist newspapers and various political actors. In line with the thesis of William I. Thomas and Dorothy Swaine Thomas<sup>3</sup> that "if men define situations as real, they are real in their consequences", society perceived the crisis regarding the alleged increase in the number of suicides as a real and threatening situation and a sign of an impending catastrophe. This is evident both from the analyses of Matteo Perissinotto, who focused on female suicide in Trieste in the period immediately after World War I, characterised by political, social, and economic insecurity, and Marko Zajc, who focused on the period from the 1960s until the collapse of Yugoslavia. During that time, the idea of Slovenians as a "suicide nation" formed in the intellectual and political discourse, and it seemed that the authorities repeatedly used the sense of crisis

2 Cf. Maurice Pinguet, *Voluntary Death in Japan* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1993).

3 William I. Thomas and Dorothy Swaine Thomas, *The Child in America: Behavior Problems and Programs* (New York: Knopf, 1928), 571, 572.

associated with the phenomenon of suicide to call for closing the ranks, disciplining individuals, and reckoning with external and internal opponents, thus legitimising their regime. Zajc, who examines how intellectuals used or rejected this idea in their discussions and how they adapted expert debates and statistics to their political agendas, as well as the other authors, who analyse media discourse in different timeframes, reveal how changes in the general public's attitudes towards suicide were reflected. In their contributions, Nuša Zadavec Šedivy, Polonca Borko, Vanja Gomboc, Vita Poštuvan, Jure Gračner, Asja Flamiš, and Adelisa Huskić focus mainly on the changes in the way the media reported on the phenomenon. These authors have demonstrated that the sensationalism revealed by Matteo Perissinotto, Jelena Seferović, and Urška Bratož in their analyses was, in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, finally joined by the first attempts to raise awareness and report on the necessity of suicide prevention, followed by the development of public health paradigm. Their findings show that, despite the gradual shift from predominantly provocative to more preventive reporting on suicide, the public's desire for "blood" and gruesome details of individual deaths never really subsided, while the democratisation and liberalisation of the media space during the 1990s also entailed tabloidisation and consequently brought about new challenges in asserting the public interest and social accountability in suicide reporting.

The completed studies have proven that suicide represents an excellent case study for the changes in values, thinking, discourses, and actions. The articles raise questions that require further in-depth reflection and a distinctly interdisciplinary approach in the future: to what extent was suicidality a self-fulfilling prophecy; to what extent did fears of a suicide epidemic generate the increase in suicidality; and were they, therefore, a contingency realised through people's mindsets and expectations.<sup>4</sup> In many ways, the articles in this thematic section contribute to the knowledge about the suicide phenomenon and the structural changes in Slovenian society during the 20<sup>th</sup> century while also comparing the development in Slovenia and the neighbouring regions. All these complex questions, which remain a research challenge for the future, include issues like the impact of the glorification and heroisation of certain suicides vs. the fear that suicidality might be "hereditary" (at the individual level, within families, and at the level of entire nations) and the influence of persistent negative and catastrophic discourses, e.g. that Slovenians are a suicidal nation.

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Verjetno je le malo reči, ki človeka zaznamujejo močneje kot dejstvo, da je minljiv. Razpetost med življenjem in smrtjo, med erosom in tanatosom, je stara kot človeštvo samo, pri čemer je, ob siceršnjem zelo pogostem tematiziranju umiranja in smrti, samomor vendarle imel prav poseben položaj in je skozi stoletja v različnih kulturnih okoljih

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4 Michael Biggs, "Prophecy, Self-Fulfilling/Self-Defeating," in Byron Kaldis (ed.), *Encyclopedia of Philosophy and the Social Sciences, Vol 2* (London etc: SAGE Publications, 2013), 766. James Watson and Anne Hill, *Dictionary of Media and Communication Studies* (Self-fulfilling prophecy) (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015), 268.

imel različne konotacije. Tokratni tematski sklop prinaša študije, ki so nastale v okviru projekta *Sin, shame, symptom: suicide and its perceptions in Slovenia (1850–2000)* financed by the Slovenian Research and Innovation Agency (research core funding No. J6-3123) in obsegajo čas od druge polovice 19. stoletja do sodobnosti, ko se je samomorilec spremenil iz kriminalca in grešnika v bolnika. V obdobju, ki se je začelo s formalno dekriminalizacijo samomora in je sovpadlo z rojstvom moderne statistike, ki je prvič v zgodovini izračunala statistično preverljive, dokazljive in znotraj določenih okolij konstantne stopnje samomorilnosti, je samomor iz greha, upora proti Stvarniku in kaznivega dejanja postal sprva »najbolj intimno dejanje«, nato pa predvsem odsev kriz in ogledalo razmer v družbi. Samomor je bil dojet kot problem na presečišču svetega in posvetnega, filozofskega, sociološkega in medicinskega, urbanega in ruralnega, z njim pa so se vsak s svojega zornega kota ukvarjali pravniki, zdravniki, sociologi, teologi in še kdo.

Samomor je bil na Slovenskem deležen veliko pozornosti predvsem zaradi dejstva, da se je stopnja samomorilnosti na območju današnje Slovenije v dobrem stoletju izjemno povišala – s treh samomorov na 100.000 prebivalcev, kolikor je po statistikah znašala leta 1873, se je povzpela na več kot 35 (v posameznih delih države pa celo na več kot 60) v zadnjih desetletjih 20. stoletja, vendar je bil do sedaj obravnavan predvsem z vidika medicinske (zlasti psihiatrične), forenzične, psihološke in suicidološke stroke, historični vidik problematike pa še ni doživel temeljitejše obdelave. V sodobnih interdisciplinarnih raziskavah, ki želijo odkriti izvor današnjih resnic o fenomenu samomora, analizirati načine, s katerimi so se te oblikovale skozi čas, in pokazati, kako so se te resnice in prepričanja odražali v vsakdanjem življenju, družbi, zakonodaji in v vedenju ljudi, pa se je historična perspektiva izkazala za nepogrešljivo.

Prispevki Irene Selišnik, Urške Bratož, Jelene Seferović in Mete Remec se vsak s svoje perspektive osredotočajo na obrobje konca 19. in prve polovice 20. stoletja, ko je samomor iz greha postal znak degeneriranosti, ki spodkopava vitalnost naroda in njegovo odpornost proti izzivom, ki jih je prinašal zgodovinski trenutek – poleg množice betežnežev, »slepih, gluhih, idiotskih, norih, epileptikov« in padanja natalitete je bil samomor namreč dojet kot simptom slabšanja zdravja naroda in znanilec njegovega skorajšnjega propada.<sup>5</sup> Samomor je bil pojmovan kot znak pomanjkanja samonadzora in nezadostnega moralnega značaja pokojnika. Irena Selišnik se osredotoča na vprašanje, kako je slovenska družba druge polovice 19. in prve polovice 20. stoletja dojemala samomor, pri čemer se naslanja na avtobiografske vire oseb, ki so umrle zaradi samomora, in pokojnikovih družinskih članov, prijateljev in družine, v katerih svet so te smrti nepopravljivo zarezale. Z vprašanjem kontekstualizacije samomora, interpretacijami vzrokov in povodov za ta korak sta se ukvarjali tudi Urška Bratož in Jelena Seferović, katerih študiji omogočata primerjavo slovenskih razmer z razmerami v sosednjih deželah. Urška Bratož se osredinja na medijski diskurz in družbeno podobo samomora ob koncu 19. in v začetku 20. stoletja, predvsem na primeru Trsta kot velikega avstrijskega urbanega centra, kjer je bil trend naraščanja samomorilnosti

5 Strahan, *Suicide and Insanity*, 72.

opazneje viden vsaj od sedemdesetih let 19. stoletja, članek Jelene Seferović pa ponuja analizo medijskega in medicinskega diskurza ter zdravstvenih kartotek psihiatričnih pacientov. Seferović, Bratož in Selišnik so prikažejo razlike, ki so jih tako družinski člani in očitvidci kot mediji in zdravniki izražali pri navajanju vzrokov za samomor glede na spol, socialni status ter celo politično pripadnost pokojnika oziroma pokojnice, in preko različnih drobcev stkejo življenjske zgodbe, ki jih zgolj statistike ne morejo zajeti. V času, ko je bil velik del populacije slabo pismen ter o svojem življenju, še manj pa o smrti, ni zapuščal pisnih dokumentov in ko so poslovilna pisma zapuščali le redki, so interpretacijo vzrokov prepustili drugim. Kot pokaže analiza Mete Remec, ki se ukvarja s primeri obravnave samomorov v sodnih spisih Okrožnega sodišča v Celju, Okrožnega sodišča v Mariboru ter posameznih primerov z Okrajnega sodišča v Trbovljah iz prve polovice 20. stoletja, opiranje na sodno gradivo, policijske zapisnike, izjave prič in sorodnikov pomeni opiranje na že filtrirane vire, v katerih se izražajo bolečina, prizadetost ter jeza priče in v katerih poskušajo največkrat oprati lastno ime ali pokazati na potencialnega krivca za tragično smrt. Tako lahko več izvemo o priči kot pa o osebi, ki je naredila samomor, kar je na prvi pogled pomembna pomanjkljivost, dejansko pa se tudi ti viri izkažejo za izjemno dragocene, saj odslkavajo odnos do samomora v različnih obdobjih in okoljih ter vsakokratno kulturno ozračje, tabuizacijo in stigmatizacijo, ki je še vedno spremljala samomor. Še več, kot pokažejo analize teh avtoric, lahko ti viri obenem osvetlijo tudi socialne, ekonomske, religiozne in regionalne posebnosti ter posredno pokažejo tudi na povezane tematike, kot je na primer položaj ženske v družini in družbi, razširjenost družinskega in spolnega nasilja itd.

Zgodovinopisje, ki lahko tako osvetli izvor današnjih prepričanj in praks, pa lahko ponudi tudi drugo perspektivo na obravnavani fenomen: denimo na prevladujoč zahodni pogled na samomor kot tragično nesrečo in tragedijo, ki bi jo bilo mogoče in treba na vsak način preprečiti. Pogosto je spregledano dejstvo, da je bil (v preteklosti) fenomen samomora v različnih družbah različno dojeman, da ni bil vedno sramota in tragedija, ampak tudi dejanje časti in poguma.<sup>6</sup> To je vidno iz analize Ivana Smiljanića, ki se ukvarja s konceptom herojskega samomora med jugoslovanskimi in zlasti slovenskimi partizani med drugo svetovno vojno ter odnosom do teh smrti po vojni, ko jim je bil formalno priznan status herojskega dejanja in vrhovnega samožrtvovanja, ki je bil posledično poveličevan in opevan, prikaže pa tudi s tem povezane zadrege, saj je odpiral zahtevna moralna vprašanja, kot je nesprejemljivost samomora z vidika marksistične etike, (ne)ustreznosti ravnanj posameznika v kriznih situacijah in mej osebne svobode.

Analize so pokazale, da so posamezniku, ki je iz takšnega ali drugačnega razloga »vzel usodo v svoje roke«, v vsem obravnavanem obdobju priznavali le delno avtonomijo, saj naj bi med javno in intimno krizo obstajale nedvoumne korelacije. Slabe socialne razmere, ponavljajoče se ekonomske krize, pogoste spremembe v državnih in ideoloških okvirih in s temi dejavniki povezani občutki negotovosti, zlasti pa prelomni dogodki, kot so bile obe svetovni vojni ter osamosvojitvena vojna leta 1991, naj bi vsakokrat znova neizogibno vodili v »epidemije samomorov«. Kot nakazujejo študije v tem tematskem

6 Cf. Pinguet, *Voluntary Death in Japan*.

sklopu, pa so bile ob realnih in otipljivih krizah predstave o teh tudi pogosto umetno ustvarjene in so jih podpihovali predvsem senzacionalistični časopisi, pa tudi različni politični akterji. V skladu s tezo Williama I. Thomasa in Dorothy Swaine Thomas,<sup>7</sup> da »če ljudje definirajo situacije kot resnične, so slednje resnične v svojih posledicah«, je družba zaznala krizo v zvezi z domnevno rastjo števila samomorov kot resnično in grozeče stanje ter znamenje bližajoče se katastrofe. To je očitno tako iz analiz Mattea Perissinotta, ki se je posvetil samomoru žensk v Trstu v obdobju neposredno po prvi svetovni vojni, zaznamovanem s politično, socialno in ekonomsko negotovostjo, kot tudi Marka Zajca, ki se je posvetil obdobju od šestdesetih let do razpada Jugoslavije, ko se je v intelektualnem in političnem diskurzu oblikovala ideja o Slovencih kot »naciji samomorilcev«, ko se zdi, da je vsakokratna oblast občutek krize, povezan s fenomenom samomora, uporabila za pozive k strnjenju vrst, discipliniranju posameznikov, za obračunavanje z zunanjimi in notranjimi nasprotniki ter s tem legitimacijo lastnega režima. Tako Zajc, ki preučuje, kako so intelektualci to idejo uporabili ali zavrnili v svojih razpravah in kako so prilagodili strokovne razprave in statistične podatke svojim političnim agendam, kot drugi avtorji, ki ponujajo analize vsakokratnega medijskega diskurza, prikazujejo, kako so se izražale spremembe v stališčih splošne javnosti do samomora. Nuša Zadavec Šedivy, Polonca Borko, Vanja Gomboc, Vita Poštuvan, Jure Gračner, Asja Flamiš in Adelisa Huskić so v svojih prispevkih pozorni zlasti na spremembe v načinu medijskega poročanja. Omenjeni avtorji prikažejo, da se je senzacionalizem, ki je na primer razviden iz analiz Mattea Perissinotta, Jelene Seferović in Urške Bratož, v drugi polovici 20. stoletja vendarle začel prepletati s prvimi poskusi osveščanja in poročanja o nujnosti preprečevanja samomora ter posledično z razvojem javnozdravstvene paradigme. Njihove ugotovitve kažejo, da kljub postopnemu prehodu od pretežno provokativnega k bolj preventivnemu poročanju o samomorih želja javnosti »po krvi« in grozljivih podrobnostih posameznih smrti očitno ni nikoli zares izzvenela in da sta demokratizacija in liberalizacija medijskega prostora v devetdesetih letih prinesla tudi tabloidizacijo medijev in s tem nove izzive pri uveljavljanju javnega interesa in družbene odgovornosti pri poročanju o samomoru.

V izvedenih raziskavah se je samomor izkazal za odlično študijo primera za premike na področju vrednot, mišljenja, diskurzov, in ravnanj. Članki nedvomno odpirajo vprašanja, ki terjajo poglobljen premislek in izrazito interdisciplinaren pristop tudi v prihodnje: do kakšne mere je bila samomorilnost samouresničujoča se prerokba, do kakšne mere so strahovi o epidemiji samomora generirali rast samomorilnosti in so bili torej kontingenca, ki se je uresničevala z načinom razmišljanja in pričakovanji ljudi.<sup>8</sup> Članki v tem tematskem sklopu v mnogočem prispevajo k vedenju tako o samem fenomenu samomora kot o strukturnih spremembah v slovenski družbi 20. stoletja in ponujajo primerjavo med razvojem na Slovenskem z razvojem v sosednjih regijah. Kompleksna vprašanja o tem, kakšen je bil po eni strani vpliv povelečevanja in heroizacije nekaterih samomorov ter po drugi strani strahu pred »dednostjo«

7 Thomas and Swaine Thomas, *The Child in America*, 571, 572.

8 Biggs, »Prophecy, Self-Fulfilling/Self-Defeating«, in Kaldis (ed.), *Encyclopedia of Philosophy and the Social Sciences*, 766. Watson and Hill, *Dictionary of Media and Communication Studies* (Self-fulfilling prophecy), 268.

samomorilnosti, na individualni ravni, znotraj posameznih družin in tudi na ravni celotnih narodov, ter kakšen vpliv je imelo ponavljanje negativnega in katastrofičnega diskurza, denimo da smo Slovenci samomorilni narod, vsekakor ostajajo raziskovalni izziv za prihodnost.

*Meta Remec*