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# Farmer Suicides and the Function of Death in Neoliberal Biopolitics

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The farmer suicides that have taken place in India since the 1990s constitute the largest wave of recorded suicides in human history. While existing research largely focuses on explaining the causes that lead farmers to take their own lives, this paper examines the biopolitical governing function that the suicides have. The paper argues that the farmer suicides have functioned to legitimate intervention into the lives of those who remain by either treating them as subjects with mental health problems or educating them on how to embrace a neoliberal entrepreneurial mentality. The farmer suicides arguably also function to dispose of a population that has become surplus in the contemporary developmental vision of the Indian state. Furthermore, the paper contests biopolitical theorization that views suicide or death as resistance to biopower, arguing that such theorization fails to recognize both the particularity of biopolitics in a context where the presence of death is ubiquitous and the way in which the death of some may reinforce the biopolitical governing of life of others. The farmer suicides express rather than contest the devaluation of “unproductive” lives in neoliberal capitalism.

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On March 27, 2017, Lok Sabha, the lower house of the Indian parliament, passed a new Mental Health Care Bill, which has been welcomed as an important sign that India is adopting a more progressive position in the treatment of mental health issues. The previous year, the bill had been passed by Rajya Sabha, the upper house of the parliament, and on April 7, 2017, it received the assent of President Pranab Mukherjee, thereby becoming the Mental Health Care Act of 2017. The act includes provisions that revise various aspects of Indian mental health care policy. However, most attention has been paid to the fact that the act also effectively decriminalizes attempted suicide. Until now, attempted suicide has been subject to punishment by a one-year prison sentence, fines, or both, under the Indian Penal Code Section 309.<sup>1</sup> The new act states that “Notwithstanding anything contained in section 309 of the Indian Penal Code any person who attempts to commit suicide shall be presumed, unless proved otherwise, to have severe stress and shall not be tried and punished under the said Code” (Ministry of Law and Justice 2017, 46).

This change in the Indian state’s approach to suicide comes against the backdrop of the largest wave of recorded suicides in human history. The suicides in question have been committed by farmers, more than a quarter of a million of whom have taken their own lives in India between 1995 and 2009 (Center for Human Rights and Global Justice 2011, 1). In the current decade, the number of farmer suicides

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<sup>1</sup>The British introduced the criminalization of suicide to India as part of their colonial administration (Niehaus 2012, 223). The Indian Penal Code that contains the criminalization of suicide was developed during the British Raj Regime of 1860 (Ranjan et al., 2014, 5).

has remained in the thousands each year.<sup>2</sup> In 2015, the number of farmers taking their own lives was 8,007. Leading the farmer suicide records in that year was the west-central state of Maharashtra, which accounted for almost 40 percent of farmer suicides.<sup>3</sup> Although for a long time the farmer suicides did not receive very much attention internationally, they have lately started to become a focal point of debates on various topics from globalization and trade liberalization to the use of fertilizers, pesticides, and genetically modified seeds. There is increasing research—both quantitative research and case studies—that seeks to explain the reasons that lead farmers to take their own lives.<sup>4</sup> The past two decades of economic reforms and the opening of agriculture to global markets, which have trapped small farmers in cycles of debt, are most often identified as the main causes of the farmer suicides. This focus is consistent with a more general tendency of suicide research to try to explain the causes of suicides so that they can be stopped (McManus 2005, 437). However, less attention has been paid to the governing function that the suicides have in the neoliberal development of a postcolonial state such as India. To address this gap, the purpose of this article is to examine the modes of governance that existing knowledge of the farmer suicides produces: the biopolitics of farmer suicide. By doing so, the article also offers a critique of existing research on biopolitics and suicide, which often seeks to interpret suicide as a challenge to the biopolitical governing of life.

In a recent examination of the political potential of suicide, Nicholas Michelsen (2016, 1) notes that there have been very few attempts to locate a politics in deliberate self-destruction. Despite its status as a foundational subject in sociology, suicide remains a relatively under-researched topic in international relations (IR) and international political sociology. Perhaps the most prominent example of self-administered death that has been examined in IR is suicide bombing. Here, research has focused on explaining the causes and motivations of suicide bombers (see Bloom 2004; Knight and Narozhna 2005). Seeking to go beyond an explanation of causes, recent examinations of suicide, focusing on the detainees at Guantánamo Bay, argue that suicide is, or can be, an expression of political agency (see Howell 2007; Beier and Mutimer 2014). Michelsen (2016, 1), likewise, argues that the kamikaze, suicide bombers, hunger striking, and self-incineration “imply the embodiment of a passionate commitment so absolute that the individual in question is willing to die.” Recent research on suicide in IR thus overlaps with the work of those writers who see death and suicide as going beyond, or offering potential resistance to, the biopolitical governing of life (see Mbembe 2003; Adorno 2014; Foucault 2015).

While the purpose of this article is not to dispute the claim that suicide *can* be an expression of political commitment, it questions the plausibility of reading suicide, or death more generally, as resistance to biopolitics. This conclusion is arrived at through an examination of the Indian farmer suicides as a case where the underlying assumptions regarding the unproductivity of the farmers’ lives, coupled with specific policy responses, effectively depoliticize the suicides. Combining theoretical inquiry and critical analysis of policy, the article probes both the limitations of existing research on biopolitics and suicide and the production of the problem of suicide in public and corporate discourse in India. This approach seeks to find out

<sup>2</sup>While the figures are striking, they become even more so when taking into account that the numbers do not include suicides committed by women. This is because women do not have title to land and are therefore not recognized as farmers in the official statistics (Kennedy and King 2014, 6).

<sup>3</sup>These numbers are provided by the National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) to the *Times of India* (2017). The reliability of the data has been questioned because it is based on police reports, and the criminalization of suicide might affect people’s willingness to report it (see Patel et al., 2012). The actual suicide death rate might thus be even higher than the records of the NCRB show.

<sup>4</sup>See Mohanty 2005; Jodhka 2006; Sridhar 2006; Suri 2006; Jeromi 2007; Münster 2012; Badami 2014; Kennedy and King 2014.

how, and with what effect, problems are represented and constituted in policies (see Bacchi and Goodwin 2016). As examples of the discourse on farmer suicide, the article highlights recent public and private farmers' mental health care initiatives in Maharashtra—a state that has been at the center of the agrarian crisis for the past two decades—and the corporate social responsibility programs of the biotechnology company Monsanto, as identified in its 2014 Sustainability Report. The article argues that the suicides have two specific governing functions—the pathologization and entrepreneurialization of the farmers. Through these frames of intelligibility, the suicides are depoliticized. While much of the literature on biopolitics and suicide assumes that suicide constitutes a creative rupture in the existing political order, the case of the farmer suicides contests this interpretation. Instead, the farmer suicides play out the devaluation of “unproductive” life in neoliberal capitalism.

The argument proceeds in four steps. The first part of the article argues that, while existing research gives credible reasons for the dramatic number of farmer suicides in India in the past two decades, it does not address the governing function that the suicides have. This shortcoming is an implication of treating neoliberalism only as a political-economic ideology, rather than also as a biopolitical rationality that entails specific modes of governing life. The article then goes on to discuss the relationship between suicide and biopolitics, particularly the notion that suicide can act as a mode of resistance to biopower. The article contends that accounts that view suicide as an escape from, or a resistance to, biopolitics fail to recognize the way in which the death of some may reinforce the biopolitical governing of life of others, as well as the ways in which the farmer suicides are entangled with the devaluation of life in neoliberal capitalism. In the third part of the article, this critique is elaborated through an examination of policy responses, which show how the farmer suicides have functioned to further legitimate intervention into the lives of those who remain, by either treating them as subjects with mental health problems or educating them on how to embrace a neoliberal entrepreneurial mentality. Finally, the article relates the farmer suicides to the problem of finitude in continental and contemporary decolonial thought, arguing that their disruptive political potential is curtailed by both their incorporation into the operation of neoliberal capitalism and the ubiquity of death in the lives of the Indian small farmers. The conclusion brings these aspects of the biopolitics of farmer suicide together in a final reflection on the problematics of knowledge production.

### The Political Economy of Farmer Suicide in India

Kondaji Rambhau Vakte, a 36-year-old resident of Vadner Bhairav, Chandwad committed suicide by consuming poison on Tuesday. According to revenue officials, the farmer was under immense pressure due to loss of crop and the loans that had to be repaid, which most likely pushed him into taking the drastic decision. According to revenue officials, the farmer was under immense pressure due to loss of crop and the loans that had to be repaid, which most likely pushed him into taking the drastic decision. He was the only earning member in his family and is survived by his wife, their two sons, parents and a brother. Devidas Bhausahab Chavan (38), another farmer from Hirapur, Chandwad, also committed suicide by consuming poison on Wednesday. He died while being treated at the civil hospital. This year, the number of suicides in the district has seen a sharp rise as compared to the 19 farmers who took the extreme step during the same period last year. So far, 19 farmers have committed suicide in the district by consuming poison and 11 hanged themselves to death. (*Times of India* 2016)

Accounts such as these are common in Indian newspapers. The cases described here are also typical, as most suicide deaths in India occur in rural areas and the most common method of taking one's own life is the ingestion of pesticides (Patel et al. 2012, 2346). Perhaps surprisingly, most of the suicides take place in

economically prosperous parts of the country, and there is a great variation in suicide rates between states within India, with some states encountering as much as ten times higher rates than others (Patel et al. 2012, 2349). Farmer suicides almost never take place in the “underdeveloped” Indian states but rather in the ones that are most geared toward economic development (Nandy 2002, 114). Maharashtra, for example, is one of India’s most prosperous states, while also having the highest farmer suicide record.<sup>5</sup>

A recent India-wide quantitative study shows that suicides are mainly committed in states that are focused on cash crop production and have high numbers of indebted farmers with only marginal landholdings (Kennedy and King 2014; also Jeromi 2007). Kennedy and King (2014, 3–6) show that cash crop production and indebtedness are the most significant factors explaining the occurrence of farmer suicides, with marginalization being particularly relevant when coexisting with indebtedness and cash crop production. Thus, the structure of agricultural production explains the state-level variation in farmer suicide rates. Several ethnographic and other case studies also show that the farmers who have been most affected by the liberalization of agriculture in the 1990s are the most likely to take their own lives (see Stone 2002; Assayag 2005; Münster 2012).

Many researchers and commentators contend that the roots of current agrarian problems lie in the 1960s “green revolution,” which started the process of the capitalization and mechanization of agriculture. With the green revolution, agriculture began to transform into a cash-based individual enterprise that requires high investments and the institution of a system of wage labor (Suri 2006, 1525). Maharashtra is a prime example of a state that witnessed impressive growth in agricultural production in the early years of the green revolution but whose production has subsequently diminished due to problems with water and soil conservation, partly resulting from the introduction of industrialized production methods.<sup>6</sup> The introduction of modified seeds that require the use of specific fertilizers and pesticides also increased the cost of cultivation and created a dependence on high-cost inputs. While the 1960s and 1970s brought changes in agricultural practices, in the 1990s there was a major shift in national level economic policies, with the state withdrawing from economic spheres that it had previously occupied. This was the case particularly in agriculture as the attention of the state was directed instead at information technology and other spheres of the “new economy.” This shift in economic priorities caused a near complete marginalization of rural society and the agrarian economy, both in the national agenda that directs development and in the popular imagination (Jodhka 2006, 1534). The state did, however, promote the shift to cash crop cultivation, which meant a greater dependence on cash income, as it was no longer possible to practice subsistence agriculture.

The liberalization of the 1990s also meant that the state gave up control of the conditions under which farmers access inputs. They now increasingly borrow from private moneylenders who charge extortionate prices. Investments in public infrastructure, such as irrigation and energy, declined, which forced farmers to seek further inputs from private actors (Sridhar 2006, 1561). “In particular, the ‘withdrawal of the state’ either as a facilitator or as a provider of inputs, extension services or credit has been the key element of the pernicious policies that have wrecked the peasant economy,” Sridhar (2006, 1563) argues. “A predatory commercialization of agriculture” has left the small and marginal peasants, in particular, in the grip of indebtedness (Sridhar 2006, 1563). Shiva (2004) calls this “the suicide economy of corporate globalisation.”

<sup>5</sup> Farmer suicide rates are high in Maharashtra, Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, and Kerala, all of which have above national average GDP.

<sup>6</sup> Kalamkar (2011) provides a comprehensive overview of Maharashtra’s agricultural development, comparing it to trends in other states and at the national level.

The shift from subsistence agriculture to cash crop cultivation, the individualization of agricultural practices, the growing costs of farming, the dependence on high-cost inputs, the liberalization policies opening India to global agribusiness, market uncertainty, neglect of agriculture by the state, and the indebtedness that is the consequence of these developments are thus considered to have largely created the “agrarian distress” that explains the past two decades’ phenomenon of farmer suicides. While much existing research focuses on these political-economic developments, some also rely on sociological theory to explain the occurrence of farmer suicide. Drawing on the classic work of [Émile Durkheim \(2006\)](#), it can be argued that the suicides are a response to the social decay of a modernizing country. According to Durkheim, at each moment in history, each society has a specific aptitude for suicide and, therefore, the suicide rate of any given society can only be explained sociologically, not by reducing suicide to individual psychological explanations.<sup>7</sup> Following Durkheim, [Mohanty \(2005, 247\)](#) argues that the farmer suicides in Maharashtra are connected to the changing conditions faced by the rural population following rapid economic growth and the spread of neoliberalism. Small farmers have experienced an increasing trend toward individualization; an identity that has been conferred on them by the market ([Mohanty 2005, 267](#)).

Existing research—whether adopting a sociological or a political economy perspective—is thus primarily concerned with finding the causes that explain farmers’ decisions to commit suicide. Debt is identified as the most important explanation, while indebtedness, in turn, is mostly a consequence of changing agricultural practices and the pressures that have followed entry into the world market. Sociological explanations tend to emphasize the disintegration of the rural social fabric that has accompanied these developments. However, existing research does not pay attention to the biopolitical functions that the suicides have. In other words, it has not examined the way in which the suicides operate as a condition of possibility for increasing public and private intervention into farmers’ lives. This shortcoming is due to the way in which the existing literature largely relies on an understanding of neoliberalism as a political-economic ideology consisting of policies of privatization, deregulation, liberalization, etc. However, approaching neoliberalism more explicitly as a specific understanding of human nature and subjectivity ([Read 2009](#); [Foucault 2010](#)) allows us to produce a deeper account of the political economy of farmer suicide. Therefore, instead of seeking to further explain *why* farmer suicide happens, the following parts of this article are concerned with *how* farmer suicide operates in the context of the contemporary biopolitics of development. In order to show why such an examination is needed, the next section problematizes the relationship between biopower and suicide.

### Suicide as Resistance to Biopolitics?

Biopolitics refers to a modern type of government that regulates populations through techniques of power that take “life itself” as their object. The techniques of biopolitics are applied to the aggregate population and the processes, such as birth, death, production, and illness, that characterize it ([Foucault 2004, 243](#)). Michel Foucault traces the way in which the biopolitical optimization and management of life enabled the insertion of bodies into the machinery of production and the adjustment of population growth to capital accumulation in seventeenth and eighteenth-century Europe.<sup>8</sup> Biopolitics was thus a necessary condition for the development of capitalism as it responded to the need to govern the life of the population toward

<sup>7</sup> [Wray, Colen, and Pescosolido \(2011\)](#) provide an overview of the body of sociological knowledge on suicide both before and after Durkheim. [Giddens \(1966\)](#) offers a useful commentary on Durkheim’s typology of suicide.

<sup>8</sup> Foucault formulates the analytic of biopolitics most clearly in *The History of Sexuality* (1990) and in the *Society Must Be Defended* (2004) lectures. While Foucault’s own work was focused on the emergence of biopolitics in Europe, others

productive ends. In his later work, Foucault identifies the specificity of biopolitics in neoliberalism, which extends the rationality of the market to domains that are not primarily economic, conceiving of the human in all areas of life as an “entrepreneur of himself” (Foucault 2010, 225–26).

The genealogy of biopolitics is now familiar enough in IR and need not be elaborated further here. While the concepts of biopower and biopolitics have found several interpretations and applications,<sup>9</sup> for the purposes of this article, the focus is on the function of death and, more specifically, suicide, in the contemporary biopolitics of development. Whereas the old sovereign power found its ultimate expression in the decision on the death of a subject, with biopolitics, death becomes the end of power (Foucault 2004, 248). “Death now becomes, in contrast, the moment when the individual escapes all power, falls back on himself and retreats, so to speak, into his own privacy” (Foucault 2004, 248). Death, thus, is the limit of power. Biopower as a power over life can never get hold of death.

What does this mean for the study of suicide? In *The History of Sexuality*, Foucault points out the importance of suicide not only as a sociological but also as a biopolitical problem:

It is not surprising that suicide—once a crime, since it was a way to usurp the power of death which the sovereign alone, whether the one here below or the Lord above, had the right to exercise—became, in the course of the nineteenth century, one of the first conducts to enter into the sphere of sociological analysis; it testified to the individual and private right to die, at the borders and in the interstices of power that was exercised over life. This determination to die . . . was one of the first astonishments of a society in which political power had assigned itself the task of administering life. (Foucault 1990, 138–39)

Although the emergence of liberalism in Europe was generally accompanied by the decriminalization of suicide, a society whose main task is to make life live cannot tolerate individual decisions to relinquish life. Hence, suicide becomes a pathology. The World Health Organization (WHO) currently defines suicide as “the act of deliberately killing oneself,” and it considers mental disorders (depression, personality disorder, alcohol dependence, and schizophrenia) and some physical illnesses (neurological disorders, cancer, and HIV) to be the risk factors that potentially lead to suicide (WHO 2016). Despite Durkheim’s efforts, psychiatry gradually won the battle for suicide, and, as a result, it is now predominantly understood as a problem of individuals rather than a problem of societies (Wray, Colen, and Pescosolido 2011; Taylor 2015). This tendency toward the individualization and psychologization of suicide can now also be identified in India. Yet, shifting the perspective from sociology to psychology also runs the risk of depoliticizing suicide.

What is, then, the political function of self-administered death? Are the contemporary farmer suicides a sign of political docility? Or are they the enactment of a very particular kind of resistance to contemporary development? Some farmers have explicitly framed their own suicide as being against the state, either by killing themselves in government offices or by writing suicide notes addressed to the government (Sainath 2007). In 2015, a farmer hanged himself at an election rally (*Times of India* 2015a). The most common suicide method—ingestion of pesticide—could also be understood as an attempt to communicate a political message. This is because the medium of suicide can sometimes be interpreted as making

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have extended his analyses to recognize the interrelationship between colonialism and the constitution of Western modernity (see Stoler 1995; Doty 1996; Spivak 1999; Venn 2006).

<sup>9</sup>To name only a few examples, in IR Foucault’s work on biopolitics has been used to analyze the politics of (in)security (Dillon and Lobo-Guerrero 2008; Vaughan-Williams 2010), the war on terror (Dillon 2007; Dauphinee and Masters 2007), global health (Elbe 2005; Voelkner 2011), race and gender (Jabri 2007; Repo 2013), as well as development (Duffield 2007; Shani 2012; Alt 2015).

a statement about the cause of the suicide (see Parry 2012). For farmers, expensive pesticides are often the reason for their indebtedness, thus arguably serving to highlight the reason for committing the suicide. Daniel Münster (2012, 198) maintains that farmers' suicides intend to do more than just end a life: "they convey a message of despair and protest and, therefore, a political message." The farmer suicides could thus also be interpreted as a sign of resistance. "Could it be that the farmers are the seers of our time—elaborating the truth of our world as abandoned by the gods?" Vasanthi Srinivasan (2015) suggests.

Similarly arguing against the pathologization of suicide, Foucault seeks in suicide an aesthetics of death beyond the banality and medicalization of death in modern societies. In a 1979 essay, "The Simplest of Pleasures," dedicated to the subject of suicide, Foucault (2015) writes: "One has to prepare it bit by bit, decorate it, arrange the details, find the ingredients, imagine it, choose it, get advice on it, shave it into a work without spectators, one which exists only for oneself." Suicide arguably offers the possibility of a unique experience. "Make something of it, something fine," Foucault (2015) suggests. Despite the tongue-in-cheek style of the essay, it is clear that Foucault sees great potential in suicide. He claims also that "suicide is not a way of cancelling the world or myself, or the two together, but a way of rediscovering the original moment in which I make myself world . . . To commit suicide is the ultimate mode of imagining" (Foucault cited in Miller 1993, 79). Suicide appears here as a way to evade biopower's hold over life.

The argument that death can constitute resistance to biopower is formulated still more explicitly by Francesco Paolo Adorno. He takes note of Foucault's reflections on suicide and concludes that "it would thus appear completely legitimate to ask if one form of resisting the biopolitical invasion could consist in opposing the gradual loss of meaning in death as well as the indefinite optimization of the event of death" (Adorno 2014, 109). The premise here is that in modern societies death has become something so banal and governmentalized that it needs to be reappropriated, potentially through suicide. It is far from obvious that such aesthetics of suicide would be applicable to a postcolonial context such as that of the Indian small farmers; death in India is not governmentalized to the extent that it is in the contemporary West. Somewhat differently, Elizabeth Dauphinee (2007, 237) argues that in some extreme situations suicide can have the effect of exposing the logic of biopower, which reduces some lives to a state of abjection where "suicide becomes the limit condition of resistance." According to Michelsen (2016, 138), "within the spaces created by biopower's exclusions, death is the only option available to agents seeking the political. In such conditions they must choose death and invest it with political meaning—making it a sacrificial register for indicting their exclusion." While Dauphinee is careful not to read suicide as a heroic act, Michelsen (2016, 9) more readily associates suicide with freedom, creativity, and "a passionate excess."

In reference to Foucault's own death, his biographer James Miller (1993, 351) writes that "if one's *bios* had been fashioned like an artwork that would express 'the *transcendens* pure and simple,' there could be no more fitting capstone to this work, particularly in dark times, than the free embrace of a beautiful death." But is such a free embrace of a beautiful death available to those who struggle in the grip of the developmental machine? In taking their own lives, are the farmers imagining a new world through the release of a passionate excess? There are at least two problems in such accounts. Firstly, they focus only on the suicidal individual and his individual escape from power. Therefore, they fail to recognize the way in which the suicides may in fact increase the biopolitical governing of those who remain. Secondly, such accounts fail to recognize the way in which the suicides are entangled with the devaluation of life in neoliberal capitalism. The following sections elaborate on these two issues.



### Farmer Suicides and Developmental Biopolitics: Pathologization and Entrepreneurialization

When farmer suicides first began to receive increasing media attention, the Indian government's response was confined to adopting a posture of denial (Sridhar 2006, 1564). Neither the central government nor the states took much notice of the crisis (Sud 2009, 105). The central government announced its first compensation package to the families of suicide victims in Maharashtra in 2006 and somewhat later in other affected states (Sridhar 2006; Jeromi 2007; Sud 2009). However, bureaucrats and politicians soon began arguing that the assistance packages in fact explained the high numbers of suicides (Sridhar 2006, 1559). According to this view, providing compensation for the families only encouraged further suicides. Furthermore, critics argued that the liberal development plan, initiated in New Delhi in the 1990s, led to such grave deterioration of the condition of farmers that the government's later efforts to provide relief were only piecemeal and did not begin to address the magnitude of the situation (Sridhar 2006, 1564; Jeromi 2007, 3246). The Indian Supreme Court recently criticized the central government for its lack of a national policy on farmer suicide. The court also emphasized that paying small compensations to the families of victims is not a real solution and does not address the root causes of the problem (*The Hindu* 2017).<sup>10</sup>

While governmental responses have been limited, others have considered corporations, NGOs, and the farmers themselves as the actors who are responsible for changing the situation. The government of Karnataka, for example, has claimed that the reasons for the suicides are psychological, not economic (Shiva 2004). Instead of changing its agricultural policy, the government demands that farmers increase their self-reliance and self-respect (Shiva 2004). By attributing the suicides to depression, marital discord, and alcoholism, the government has aimed to "personalize" the suicides (Srinivasan 2015). The dominant official approach has thus been to view the suicides as an individual pathology, with only limited recognition of the role of economic and political factors. In 2009, the Indian spiritual leader Amma advised the chief minister of Maharashtra by noting that "what is needed is social and spiritual interventions so that the farmers realize that suicide is not the way out. . . . Rather than that, they should understand that they need to develop self-confidence. The future generation should have the mental strength to face life's challenges" (Amma 2009). The farmers are thereby individualized and constituted as pathological subjects.

On the individual level, the focus has thus been on issues of mental health. In 2015, Maharashtra was the Indian state with the highest number of farmer suicides, and the response of the Maharashtra state government was to initiate a Prerana Farmers' Mental Health Service Program, whereby the government developed a mental health intervention plan in response to the increasing number of suicides (*Times of India* 2015b). This "action plan to shrink the blues away" consists of the induction of more psychiatrists in suicide prone areas and the deployment of community health workers to test the mental health of farmers (*Times of India* 2015b). A parallel example of NGO-led mental health work is Vishram: Vidarbha Stress and Health Program, also operating in Maharashtra. The program is directed at agricultural communities where "mental disorders, such as depression and alcohol use problems, are major public health problems" and "suicide is a major cause of death" (Vishram 2017). Vishram provides both preventive counselling and mental health care for people who have attempted suicide. Public and private mental health care programs, such as these two recent examples, are not a new response to the farmer suicides. Sumant Badami has analyzed one such program in Kerala,

<sup>10</sup> Surinder Sud (2009) provides a detailed account of the policies that have been proposed and carried out in different Indian states in response to the farmer suicides.

where he argues that mental health policy downplayed the changes in economic conditions and promoted a specifically psychiatric analysis of suicide. [Badami \(2014, 94\)](#) cites a 2010 lecture by Dr Hareesh at the DMHP Mental Health for the People Training Initiative: “Now all the people in debt are not committing suicide. So the problem is not debt; the problem is their lack of mental power. First of all we should boost up their mental capacity and create alternative types of thinking among these types of people, only then can we solve suicide-related problems.” [Badami \(2014, 96\)](#) nevertheless concludes that “by distancing themselves from the socio-economic causes of suicide, mental health professionals in effect create an oversimplified relationship between medically treatable mental health diseases and the incidence of suicide in the region.” This is not to discredit the provision of mental health services. Rather, drawing attention to such mental health responses goes to show how they individualize farmers and produce them as subjects responsible for changing their outmoded ways of thinking. With better mental power and capacity—so the reasoning goes—farmers would be able to cope with their situation. The recent decriminalization of suicide as part of the Mental Health Care Act, rather than through a separate amendment of the Penal Code, contributes to such reasoning. The psychiatric interpretation of the suicides is thus a particular strategy of intelligibility that renders the suicides manageable in a particular way.

Another approach has been to call on corporations to “teach” the farmers a way out of their predicament. Arun [Iyer \(2009, 429\)](#) argues that corporations can be socially responsible “by acting like a gentle father in their dealings with these farmers.” Such direction is needed because “the Indian farmer does not seem to be a knowledgeable consumer and an aggressive entrepreneur” ([Iyer 2009, 438](#)). Following a colonial pedagogy, one of the responses has thus been to call on corporations to provide the farmers with more education, expertise, and knowledge to foresee and cope with the insecurities of the contemporary world ([Kaushal 2015, 53](#)). [Iyer \(2009, 440\)](#) asks: “would it be wrong to appeal to the paternalistic benevolence of these corporations who seem to be the only ones in a position to do something to help the farmers? It does not seem far-fetched to say that benign paternalism is one good way by which these corporations can exercise their social responsibility.”

Along these lines, the biotechnology company Monsanto, which is one of the largest providers of seeds, herbicides, and pesticides worldwide, has had a wealth of corporate social responsibility projects in India. One such program is Project SHARE, which operated between the years 2009–14 in Maharashtra, Andhra Pradesh, and Rajasthan. Project SHARE aimed at “helping small and marginal farmers access information, techniques and build capabilities to make their efforts sustainable” ([Monsanto 2015](#)). The program provided farmers with “awareness on best agricultural practices,” while also “procuring inputs at a reasonably advantageous price” ([Monsanto 2015](#)). Additionally, the program created Self Help Groups (SHGs), which targeted the women of the beneficiary families in order to help them develop skills that allow them to find profitable work ([Monsanto 2014, 46](#)). A further program targeting specifically women has been Project AASHA (Hindi for “hope”), which has been carried out in Maharashtra, Karnataka, Telangana, and Haryana. AASHA has sought to “help protect the health and interests of India’s most vulnerable rural populations” ([Monsanto 2014, 83](#)). Providing seminars and camps on women’s empowerment, the project “has benefited more than 400 female contract workers, teaching them new skills and boosting their self-confidence” ([Monsanto 2014, 83](#)). While examining the specifically gendered aspects of the biopolitical governing of farmer suicide is beyond the scope of this article, it is worth highlighting that many of the projects target women as potential entrepreneurial subjects, and there are important gendered implications in the

ways in which responsibility is constructed in response to the suicides.<sup>11</sup> With these and other similar projects, Monsanto is arguably playing the part of the teacher who guides the farmers who supposedly do not know their own best interests. While different from the mental health framing, this approach also renders the suicides manageable, this time through the adoption of a more entrepreneurial mentality.

Although projects such as the above can potentially make a positive difference in the lives of individual farmers or their family members, they also further integrate them into the practices of neoliberal development and reinforce the regime of truth whereby the farmers are themselves responsible for their own plight. The suicides thus work to legitimize more intervention into the lives of those who remain. Instead of, for example, plans for land reform, solutions are limited to teaching farmers ways of coping with socioeconomic conditions as they are. Although the suicides have brought the difficult conditions of the farmers into public perception, their function is not simply one of resisting the current condition. Due to the frames of intelligibility that construct the suicides as resulting from poor mental health or the generic irrationality of the farmers, the suicides have functioned to legitimize practices that ensure the continuation of the current political-economic situation. Importantly, the political economy of farmer suicide does not consist only of the liberalization of the agricultural market, the dependency on high-cost inputs, and the neglect of agriculture by the state but also of the promotion of the entrepreneurial subject that is empowered to operate in the market and is mentally resilient enough to face its possible downturns. Nevertheless, we might also ask why the number of farmers killing themselves has not resulted in more significant and coordinated attempts to address the problem. “Why isn’t the number enough, when numbers seem to be what reason and rationalizations call for?” Akta Kaushal (2015, 53) asks. The next section turns to this question and its implications for thinking of suicide as resistance to biopolitics.

### Farmer Suicides and the Problem of Finitude

The way in which biopolitics incorporates the death of some is related to what Michael Dillon calls “factual finitude.” According to Dillon, modern biopolitics is the problematization of politics and security as the securing of the infinite government of finite things. “Factual finitude” means that there is “only an infinite succession of finite entities whose days are always numbered” (Dillon 2015, 20). Biopolitics is the governing and administration of the infinite coming and going of life forms. As long as the finitude of things and beings does not become threatening to the continuation of government, it is crucial to the operation of biopolitics. It appears that the farmer suicides have functioned to further legitimate biopolitical calls to educate those who remain on how to cope, manage risk, and live properly. In justifying the education of farmers, the knowledge that is produced of the suicides is useful for the administration of life.

On the other hand, those activists who prefer to refer to the farmer suicides as “genocide” argue that the suicides are contributing to the government’s plans to reshape the agricultural sector. “This genocide is a result of deliberate policy imposed by the World Trade Organisation and implemented by the Government. It is designed to destroy small farmers and transform Indian agriculture into large-scale corporate industrial farming,” Shiva (cited in *The Hindu* 2006) argues. Similarly, the documentarists Nandan Saxena and Kavita Bahl (2011) point out that “if one farmer kills himself, we may call it a suicide. But when a quarter of a million kill

<sup>11</sup> While not focusing on this specific aspect of the governing of farmer suicide, Ranjana Padhi’s book *Those Who Did Not Die* (2012) provides an extensive examination of the experiences of women, children, and the elderly in families where farmer suicide has taken place.

themselves, how can the government call it a suicide? It is genocide. These farmers are being killed by design.” Small farmers have become redundant in the current developmental vision of the Indian state. Therefore, activists argue that those who supposedly do not contribute to the productivity of a population are let die. The farmer suicides are thereby incorporated into factual finitude. Despite the magnitude of the phenomenon, the farmer suicides have not disrupted the neoliberal political economy of agricultural development because they reflect rather than challenge its logic.

Yet, there are also other perspectives from which finitude and the function of death can be considered. Particularly important for the purposes of this article is Martin Heidegger’s concept of being-toward-death (*Sein-zum-Tode*), developed in his 1927 major work, *Being and Time*. Paying attention to the notion of being-toward-death is relevant here because Heidegger’s work has served as a focal point for many of the continental thinkers, including Foucault, whose works have been taken up in critical IR to discuss questions of life and death in global politics. Furthermore, Heidegger’s work encapsulates the centrality that Western thought has afforded to death as constitutive of modern subjectivity. In Heidegger’s work, the notion of being-toward-death connotes the existential horizon that marks the being of each *Dasein*.<sup>12</sup> Heidegger argues that in being-toward-death one may become free to the possibilities that are available to one’s being. Faced with the singularity of one’s death, one becomes aware of possibilities and thus of the fact that one’s being is not determined by current actuality. In Heidegger’s (1962, 307; original emphases) words, “death is *Dasein*’s *ownmost* possibility. Being toward this possibility discloses to *Dasein* its *ownmost* potentiality-for-Being, in which its very Being is the issue.” By facing death and recognizing one’s mortality, *Dasein* is transformed and becomes open to what it could become.<sup>13</sup> In other words, a human being may live a meaningful life by confronting his or her own finitude and extracting a meaning out of his or her potential death. What Heidegger thus seeks is the mobilization of mortality as the condition for free action in the world.

Importantly, Heidegger thinks that although death is always already there for us, we tend to forget it and push it aside instead of appropriating its possibility for living a life that is meaningful for us. Dillon (1996, 60) explains that human beings are generally taken up by day-to-day affairs—what Heidegger calls fallenness—and only rarely confront and assume their being-toward-death in such a way that it frees them to act. As opposed to the everyday flow of living a life, an appreciation of one’s mortality could affect a transformation in one’s being. Yet, one might ask whether death has such a function for those living in the midst of the agrarian crisis. Does the encounter with death as the ultimate possibility effect a transformation of being for the farmers?

Locating Heidegger’s work in a postcolonial context, Achille Mbembe seeks to think of death as the horizon of freedom. He argues that variants of black thought have posed the problem of freedom similarly. Referring to the period of Jim Crow after the Reconstruction, Mbembe points out that the main obstacle to freedom in those years was the constant threat of death:

Since death . . . is brought by another, the problem of freedom in black thought is obviously rendered in terms of the *ownership of death*. To be free in the world of the slave, in other words, is to be able to recognize one’s death as one’s own most valuable possession, that is to embrace it as a property of one’s own subjectivity. It is precisely

<sup>12</sup> Refusing to couch his discussion on the concepts of “life,” “the human,” or “the subject,” Heidegger chooses the term *Dasein* to refer to human beings insofar as they relate to being. *Dasein* is the kind of being for whom being is an issue (see Heidegger 1962, 32).

<sup>13</sup> Heidegger nevertheless rejects suicide because it would mean giving up the horizon of possibility that is opened up by being-toward-death: “Through suicide, for example, I precisely relinquish the possibility as possibility,” Heidegger (cited in Haar 1993, 8) explains.

the slave's ability to actualize his potential death that permits him or her to find the exit that leads to his or her freedom. (Mbembe 2011, 23, original emphasis)

Alongside slavery, Mbembe (2003, 40) examines the late-modern colonial occupation of Palestine as an expression of "death-worlds": those "new and unique forms of social existence in which vast populations are subjected to conditions of life conferring upon them the status of *living dead*" (original emphasis). In such death-worlds, we find the operation of necropolitics that blurs the lines that separate resistance and suicide, sacrifice and redemption, martyrdom and freedom (Mbembe 2003, 40). Mbembe, as well as Michelsen following him, identify the Palestinian suicide bomber as an example of such intermeshing of death and freedom.

Yet, the condition of the Indian farmers cannot be easily likened to slavery or to late-modern colonial occupation—situations that Mbembe sees as giving rise to an antisovereign politics of suicide. The interrogations, beatings, curfews, roadblocks, military posts, soldier patrols, and shootings that Mbembe describes as the terror that gives rise to the interweaving of death and freedom for the suicide bomber are not the reality of the indebted farmer. The farmers are not subjected to the ever-present threat of death that creates the need to reclaim ownership of one's death as the last and only realm of sovereignty. The biopolitics of death that the farmers inhabit differs both from the banalization and governmentalization of death in the contemporary West and from the constant threat of death in slavery and colonial occupation. The farmers are free, but, within the dominant model of agricultural development, they are *unproductive*. As the significant state level variation in suicides shows, there is no uniform biopolitics of suicide spanning across all of India. Instead, the vast majority of the suicides take place in states that promote cash crop production, that have highly indebted farmers, and where farmers have only marginal landholdings. The suicides are a response to pauperization, not to coercive sovereign necropolitics as in Mbembe or to the medicalization and optimization of death as in Foucault. Thus, it is necessary to recognize both the significance of the material conditions that underlie farmer suicide and the devaluation of the indebted farmers' lives as an explanation for the relatively successful depoliticization of their suicides.

Similarly drawing on Heidegger, but differing from Mbembe's interpretation, Nelson Maldonado-Torres (2007, 252) argues that death is not an individualizing factor for colonized or racialized subjects. A colonial world, Maldonado-Torres (2008, 100) argues, is "a world where the allegedly extraordinary event of anticipating one's own death cannot be achieved, not because the individual is lost in an anonymous 'mass,' but simply because death . . . is already part and parcel of ordinary life." Even though farmers do not face an explicit threat of death, the presence of death in their lives is ubiquitous. Those who document the farmer suicides in the most deprived communities of Punjab note that, "People are not only dying. In a family you have something like five suicides. Four suicides are quite a few. Three suicides are in abundance. Two suicides . . . In every village, there would be about ten double suicides" (an NGO worker interviewed in Bahl and Saxena 2014). This everyday presence of death in communities that are affected by the suicides comes across in many different types of accounts and representations of the phenomenon (see also Josson 2010). What this means is that being-toward-death as the recognition of finitude that leads to a new beginning is not available because everyday life is always already a constant encounter with the closeness, if not the threat, of death. The anticipation of death is thus not so much a possibility as it is a reality (Maldonado-Torres 2008, 280). If subjects are afflicted by daily encounters with forms of death, it is not an extraordinary event that could generate meaningful existence.

For this reason, Maldonado-Torres (2007, 251) suggests that decoloniality—the reversal of colonial power relations in culture, labor, knowledge production, and

the general understanding of being—does not arise out of one's encounter with the singularity of one's death but from a desire to evade death; not only one's own but also that of others. This approach to death seems more applicable to the situation of the farmers than the antisovereign politics of suicide identified by Mbembe because it better reflects the existence of a power relation—instead of a relation of mere domination—that the farmers are a part of. For the farmers, the problem of finitude is marked by the immediacy of death, but so also it is marked by the current political economy rendering them as replaceable and disposable. Hence, as the power relations involved in differentiations such as race, caste, gender, sexuality, and class place some subjects in closer proximity to death than others, decoloniality cannot be based on the anticipation of death or its realization through suicide but on the transformation of the power relations where some face death as part of ordinary life. In the case of the farmers, this necessarily means addressing the issue of pauperization, which creates the conditions for the suicides.

### Conclusion

The farmer suicides have at least two governing functions: they offer an avenue for claiming that farmers need to be either treated because of mental illness or educated because of their inability to cope with the demands of the contemporary world. Offering solutions such as mental health initiatives, self-help groups, and empowerment seminars, the strategy of intelligibility preferred by the government, corporations, and some NGOs is the pathologization of the farmers, while the solution is their constitution as entrepreneurial subjects. The recent decriminalization of suicide takes away the threat of prosecution and possibly removes some of the stigma associated with suicide, but it also further reinforces the presumption that a person who attempts or commits suicide has a mental illness. This article's analysis of the biopolitics of farmer suicide brings to light the problematic way in which, in policy responses, the discursive competition between sociopolitical and psychological modes of explanation tips in favor of the latter, regardless of the extensive academic research on the political economy of farmer suicide. The empirical implication of this analysis is a more critical questioning of such individualizing policy responses.

At the same time, the article has called into question the claim that suicide serves to challenge the biopolitical governing of life. Both Foucault and Heidegger have been influential in thinking of death as a kind of ultimate possibility. For Heidegger, by realizing the singularity of one's death, one may become free to live one's own life. For Foucault, death is one of those limit-experiences that modernity turns into an object of knowledge, and thus of governance, but which might be reconceived in a way that expresses one's will to transcendence. Influenced by Heidegger and Foucault, respectively, Mbembe and Michelsen provide important accounts of the political potential of suicide. While it may be tempting to similarly interpret the farmer suicides as an ultimate form of rejection of the contemporary development model, the two above-mentioned functions that the suicides have help to explain why they nevertheless do not disrupt the operation of biopower: First, they help to legitimize the increasing biopolitical governance of those who remain, and, second, they play out global capitalism's devaluation of certain lives. The farmer suicides thus function as a way of disposing of a population that is supposedly no longer needed in the contemporary development imagination that seeks a move from small to large-scale industrial farming. As such, the anticipation of death is no extraordinary event that could generate new meaning for existence, nor does suicide affect a transformation of the biopolitical governing of life for those who remain.

The case of the farmer suicides shows some of the functions of death in the context of contemporary biopolitics of development. It also highlights the intimate relation between governance and resistance in biopolitics: what appears as resistance

is often incorporated by power in a way that results not in its undermining but in its reinforcement. Yet, this does not mean that agency is inevitably futile. Instead of adopting a frame of interpretation that either considers the situation of the farmers as one of utter despair and abjecthood or renders them as self-assertive agents engaging in ultimate acts of subversion, I have sought to examine some of the political effects of such strategies of intelligibility. Ultimately, these kinds of abstractions are only ever able to offer a limited understanding of the reality of suicide and its meaning to those who commit it and to those who are left behind. Nevertheless, IR could benefit from a better understanding of varied representations of suicide and, more broadly speaking, of the functions of death in the contemporary global politics of development, which are often elided in accounts that focus solely on its life-enhancing aspects.

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