A second commentary, forwarded to the conference by Victoria de Grazia, elaborated on and challenged the idea of Hollywood's discursive power. De Grazia pointed out that Hollywood, like other global businesses such as McDonalds, was willing to appropriate and hybridize any product in the name of profit. While this argument suggests that there is indeed so much semantic malleability that one might assume the dominance of discursive power, de Grazia reminded the conference of those key moments in the twentieth century when the American state had sought to align imagery with the exercise of power—particularly in times of emergency and war, including the current war on terrorism. In those moments, the "American image machine" notoriously moves from discursive construction to ideological use and exercises exceptional power.

The final discussion lasted for two and a half hours and was at times heated, especially when it came to questions of methodology. Among the many topics discussed was the character of the Hollywood empire: should it be described as an empire of trade or an empire of state? Should one define it as imperial or global? And, finally, is global imagination at all possible?

Christof Mauch

SUICIDE IN EARLY MODERN EUROPE

Conference at the German Historical Institute, November 30–December 1, 2001. Conveners: Vera Lind (GHI) and Jeffrey Watt (University of Mississippi). Participants: Donna Andrew (University of Guelph), Machiel Bosman (Amsterdam), Jim Boyden (Tulane University), Elizabeth Dickenson (University of Texas), Craig Koslofsky (University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign), David Lederer (National University of Ireland), Jeffrey Merrick (University of Wisconsin at Milwaukee), Paul Seaver (Stanford University).

The history of suicide is a fairly new topic of historical research, but has become increasingly important in the past decade as a way to understand broader cultural and social issues as well as long-term changes in mentality. Almost forty years ago, the English historian Peter Laslett wrote in his famous study *The World We Have Lost* that increased knowledge of the history of suicide would provide a sensitive index of the relationship between personal discipline and social survival, and would so illuminate the society of our ancestors. This conference brought together new research on the history of suicide from different European countries. The

papers concentrated on the early modern period, during which significant changes in attitudes toward suicide took place. Far into the seventeenth century, Europeans tended to identify suicide with demonic temptation, but by the eighteenth century the devil disappeared and gave way to an interpretation that has remained dominant until today: Suicide is generally understood as the expression of a physical and/or mental illness. The conference participants tried to explain this change from different perspectives, since the phenomenon of suicide involves cultural, political, legal, medical, social, sexual, religious, and intellectual aspects. They discussed the legal dimension of suicide as well as the relationship to political culture. Cases of prominent suicides from several countries were analyzed. Statistical evidence, questions of gender differences, and psychological approaches also contributed to a broad debate on the history of suicide.

David Lederer presented the first paper, on the cultural history of self-sacrifice in Hungary, a country that has one of the highest rates of reported suicides in the world. In trying to explain this high rate, Lederer suggested that during centuries of war and oppression, Hungarians cultivated a resilient tradition of self-sacrifice that became part of their cultural identity. Although historical records of suicide cases are lacking, he reported that there is an abundant number of legendary cases that employ a wide definition of suicide and martyrdom. This explanation is supported by the fact that the Hungarian suicide rate has dropped rapidly since the country regained independence and stability.

Machiel Bosman concentrated on the juridical aspects of early modern suicide in Amsterdam. On the basis of judicial proceedings from 1532 onwards, he identified three stages of decriminalizing suicide from the sixteenth to the eighteenth century: In the sixteenth century, suicides generally did not appear before a court. Instead, authorities were more likely to punish only the suicides of criminals. A century later, suicides were tried in the courts, but the laws were not enforced, and a quiet burial was the norm. In the eighteenth century, only criminals were prosecuted for killing themselves, and this was done by exposing their dead bodies in public in order to deter others. Bosman argued that neither the Reformation nor the Enlightenment influenced the decriminalization of suicide in Amsterdam. He found that denying burial to suicides had more to do with a code of honor than with religious concerns, and the process of decriminalization started long before the Enlightenment.

Donna Andrew presented a paper entitled "The Suicide of Sir Samuel Romilly: Apotheosis or Outrage?" Romilly was a member of the English Parliament, a prominent lawyer, and a crusader for the abolition of the slave trade, as well as the reform of criminal law. His suicide in 1818 received a lot of attention and evoked a broad public debate. Andrew

investigated this debate to find out more on early nineteenth-century attitudes toward suicide and came to the conclusion that the public could not decide whether Romilly's death represented sin or sacrifice. The majority mourned him as a model policy-maker, self-made business entrepreneur, and family man. In order to understand his suicide, they drew a connection between his family values and public achievements, and came to the conclusion that his extraordinary efforts had taken their toll on his physical and emotional well-being. His suicide could therefore be seen as the result of an illness. Romilly thus evoked the image of a warrior fallen in battle—a victim of the sacrifices he had to make. Others, however, criticized his death, mostly on religious grounds. They condemned his lack of Christian submission, insufficient faith, pride, and what they saw as an act of cowardice. Besides the debate over sacrifice or sin, other contemporary themes emerging from the discussion on Romilly's death were the question of the necessity of inquest juries and operations, and the recognition of a social bias in verdicts, visible through the leniency with which Romilly was treated due to his prestige.

Vera Lind presented a paper on the early modern psychological experience of suicidal thoughts and suicide attempts. By searching for the cultural codes reflected in the internal perceptions, she explored the way suicides experienced their body and mind, how they articulated their feelings, how they connected specific sensations to the wish to end their lives, and their perceptions of suicide. Lind argued that although suicide had been decriminalized, suicidal feelings remained an unspeakable, unthinkable taboo throughout the early modern period. Bodily signs and feelings were experienced within the culturally constructed stereotypes of melancholy, but were not connected to the wish to die. Instead, people who survived their suicide attempts later described themselves as passively enduring some external, forceful feeling that overcame them, thus allowing them to escape responsibility for what then happened. However, the way they identified these outside forces changed during the eighteenth century. Whereas diabolical temptations dominated in the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, illness and personal problems increasingly became the causes by the mid-eighteenth century. Lind concluded that the perceptional taboo of the suicidal act also shows that there was a more or less conscious awareness of its religious, social, and legal consequences. The cases in which suicides did not describe themselves as being driven by outside forces that they passively endured were suicides connected to religious melancholy and to the phenomenon of murder committed out of suicidal thoughts.

In his paper entitled "Suicide and the Secularization of the Body in Early Modern Saxony," Craig Koslofsky analyzed an administrative dispute between civil and church authorities over the burial of the body of

a suicide between 1702 and 1706 in Leipzig. This micro-historical approach not only allowed him to show how attitudes towards suicide were expressed, but also how church and city politics worked in this context. The dispute highlighted suicide in popular belief and in church law at a time when ideas about suicide started to become increasingly secularized. Although the burial of suicides had become the responsibility of local administration by the end of the sixteenth century, ultimately the Saxon consistory won the dispute and reclaimed authority over the bodies of suicides. Koslofsky concluded that the secularization of ideas about suicide led only indirectly to a secularization of authority over the body of a suicide.

Jeffrey Merrick discussed how a social history of suicide in late eighteenth-century Paris could be written by picking the year 1775 as a case study. After evaluating different types of sources for their usefulness, Merrick settled on the reports of the forty-eight police commissioners in Paris who were responsible for the investigation of sudden and suspicious deaths. Some of the most interesting observations Merrick gleaned from his analysis of twenty suicide cases in these reports concern the social networks operating and the collective attitudes of the time. Acquaintances of the dead overwhelmingly blamed their suicides on physical or mental disorders, and did not refer to sin or crime. Also, when talking to the police, witnesses generally toned down or even manipulated their stories in order to avoid posthumous prosecution.

Paul Seaver investigated the reactions towards suicides in seventeenth-century London, especially the reasons offered to explain why people killed themselves. Although both the church and state at this time still considered suicide a terrible crime and sin, Seaver concluded that the treatment of suicide cases "points to the new and powerful role London as a metropolis was coming to play in English society and culture." The big city as a center for communication, the exchange of ideas, book production, and the formation of opinions became a leader in new attitudes and cultural change during this century.

Jim Boyden and Emily Dickenson co-authored a paper on ambiguous attitudes toward suicide in early modern Spain. They took the example of a women committing suicide at the beginning of the sixteenth century to illustrate some of the important points of Spanish perceptions. Like other European countries at the time, the Spanish church and state unanimously condemned suicide. Suicides were denied a proper burial, and their families were deprived of property and prohibited from taking up high-profile careers. However, due to the influence of Jewish traditions and the important role of honor in Spain, social attitudes towards suicides were more complex. There were some cases in which honorable suicide

was openly admired, and others in which people pitied the actions of the victim if he or she were infused by insanity.

Jeffrey Watt used the Republic of Geneva in the eighteenth century as a case study of the incidence of and attitudes toward suicide in relation to changing religious perceptions. He paid special attention to whether a typically modern gender difference existed, in which men consistently kill themselves in greater numbers than women. The archival sources for Geneva are especially rich, and the criminal records for suicide cases combined with a death registry that recorded every single death in Geneva provide an almost complete picture of the number of suicides in addition to details on the circumstances. Watt's evidence suggests that the Enlightenment had little to do with secularization of suicide but furthered a change in mentality that was already under way. The desacralization of Genevan society at the beginning of the eighteenth century affected every level of society, men and women alike, and dissociated killing oneself from demonic possession. Mental and physical illness were cited as the most common motives for suicide by the end of the century. Watt observed a striking gender difference and suggested that the higher number of male suicides was due to a greater vulnerability to a wider range of motives as religious deterrents declined, although men were no less religious than women. As further evidence, he also cited the fact that the majority of female suicides were viewed as the expression of an illness whereas only half of all male suicides were attributed to poor health. Political and economic crises may have been more immediately responsible for the explosion of suicide numbers as well as the growing gender gap, but the development of a more secular mentality was the most decisive factor for changing attitudes towards suicide.

All in all, the conference highlighted the latest research in a field that is still developing. The papers showed that research on suicide can dramatically improve our understanding of early modern societies, especially when it comes to explaining long-term changes in mentality in different levels of society. Additionally, it became clear that suicide must be understood as a cultural phenomenon. A publication of the papers in an essay collection is currently in preparation. The beautiful warm weather at the beginning of December ensured that the success of the conference was not entirely a scholarly one. In fact, the atmosphere was so enjoyable that the group irritated some fellow restaurant guests one night, who eavesdropped on the continuing lively discussion and were left slightly stunned when they found out that this happy group had come together for a suicide conference. It should also be noted that the conference began and ended with the same number of participants.

Vera Lind