

INTRODUCTION: THE USES OF DEATH IN EUROPE

LAWRENCE J. TAYLOR
Lafayette College

The topic of death has loomed large of late in the work of both anthropologists and historians.¹ Approaching the topic from their respective traditions and with distinctive methods derived from different kinds of evidence, the two disciplines have arrived at a number of complementary strategies and insights which can be brought usefully to bear on the subject of death in Europe. Both perspectives inform the essays in this issue: a small but appropriately diverse collection exploring European reactions to, and constructions of, death. The first piece is intended to bring an archaeological perspective to the attention of cultural anthropologists working in Europe (and indeed elsewhere), and the remaining three essays treat, respectively, death in Protestant Scotland, Catholic Ireland, and Orthodox Greece. The title of the issue and this essay is meant to draw attention to a motif in all the essays: that death is not only a problem, but also an opportunity—an occasion for furthering social, cultural, and political ends. A brief excursus through the anthropological and historiographical treatments of death will serve to trace the genesis of this approach, and thus to introduce the essays.

Since the early years of this century, anthropological analyses of death rituals and related mortuary customs have been, by and large, fundamentally Durkheimian, and rooted in particular in the work of Van Gennep (1960) and Hertz (1960). Indeed, most of what can be called symbolic anthropology has developed along these lines, though diverging along two paths: one mainly sociological and concerned with the relation between symbolic and social systems, and the other focusing on symbolic systems as such and thereby exploring the cultural construction of meaning. In regard to the study of death, anthropologists have brought both these perspectives to bear primarily on ritual practices. The sociological view can be found, for example, in the works of Goody (1962) or Douglass (1969), and has also dominated much of the contemporary archaeological analysis of mortuary remains (see Levy this issue). A central preoccupation with meaning as such, however, predominates in such recent studies as those of Danforth and Tsiras (1981) and Metcalf (1982). From either perspective, the event or idea of death is viewed as a problem which demands solution. Death ritual is thus interpreted as the assertion of a shared, historically

stable social and/or cultural order against the chaos of the inevitable event. Both approaches have born fruit in Europe, yet the limitations of analyses rooted in the structural functionalist tradition are also particularly apparent there. It is difficult to pretend that even relatively isolated village communities are culturally homogeneous, unchanging social worlds.

A more dynamic view of both social and symbolic systems is possible, however, once we note that the very nature of the symbolic response to the event converts death from problem to opportunity. Any symbolic statement which succeeds in framing and defining the experience of death as part of some larger and compelling order (structurally or by association) not only makes sense of death, it also invests that larger order with a kind of ultimate reality (of the sort Geertz has described as the *sine qua non* of religion) derived from the deep emotional power and resonance of the experience of death. This insight is at the heart of Bloch and Parry's (1982) treatment of death ritual, where Bloch in particular stresses the ways in which otherwise ephemeral social systems and even strong political authorities use funerary ritual to call themselves into being. Feely-Harnick (1984) also demonstrates the rich possibilities of a symbolic/political perspective on death in Madagascar. However, this definitive quality makes death, its control and definition, a source of potential conflict and significant change. That is, if funerals and other responses to death are important ways in which a social and cultural order reproduces itself, then the meaning of death, in its particular or general manifestations, may be contested by groups and/or individuals with different perspectives and interests. At particular junctures such contention may take on a political dimension, since whichever individual, group, or institution seems to control at least the public, dominant version of death may thereby manifest great power and moral authority. Hence the possibility for dramatic as well as incremental change in the death customs of complex societies.

From the more longitudinal perspective of the historian and archaeologist these elements—contention over and change in the meaning and practice of death customs—take on further significance. In the process of state or regime formation, for example, there is competition not only for the control of material

resources, but for a "moral monopoly" (see Inglis 1987). In that competition there may be a struggle for the control of those rituals and other cultural forms used in the framing of emotions and understanding. Such considerations arise in historical studies which attempt to interpret long-term processes (for example, Elias 1978, 1982, or Ariès 1981) or in those works which focus on periods and places characterized by major change (Etlin 1984). For example, from Ariès' monumental study it appears that much of the late medieval and early modern history of death in the West involved the sometimes gradual and sometimes more abrupt encroachments of the Catholic Church into the experience of death. Although Elias does not concern himself with changing responses to death, his model of the "civilizing process," stressing the importance of particular settings and occasions for the production and reproduction of class culture in Europe, is directly applicable. To take but one instance, the contrast between the different settings of and decorum at wakes, some of which were targets of the civilizing offensive of the post-Tridentine Catholic Church, probably served to distinguish emerging classes.

Where moral authority is unclear, and the dominant religion either disestablished, in a state of crisis, or by doctrine unsympathetic to the generation of symbolic forms, the way is left open to a more general competition in the definition of death, as part of a wider contest over meaning and moral authority. In such cases the competition is through the generation of rituals and other symbolic cultural forms which compete for hegemony among various segments of the population. A good case in point is the elaboration of cemetery forms in late eighteenth-century France, the object of Richard Etlin's (1984) masterful study. Likewise the sometimes disguised re-invention of essentially Catholic versions of death ritual in Protestant communities, whose theology prohibited it, can be grasped from this perspective. (See Stannard 1977 and Taylor 1980, n.d.).

These historical studies point up another strength of history *vis-a-vis* anthropology. Unable to rely on descriptive accounts of ritual practice for many times and places, historians have sought evidence of changing *mentalité* in respect to death in discourse (for example, Le Goff 1984; Ginsberg 1982), wills (Vovelle 1970), and material culture (Ariès 1981). Such cultural forms—words and objects which have life outside of ritual—have been given more and better attention by historians and archeologists than social anthropologists, a benefit of the very limitations of cultural history. The results are instructive. Le Goff's

(1984) treatise relies on essentially discursive evidence to unearth significant changes in the area of Church doctrine. The elaboration of beliefs in a purgatory whose inmates could be moved along by prayer meant

the extension of communal ties into the other world [enhancing] the solidarity of families, religious organizations, and confraternities. And for the Church, what a marvelous instrument of power! (Le Goff 1984: 12).

Vovelle's (1970) study of Provençal wills shows another historical route to discovering as well as explaining changing reactions to death. Ariès' monumental treatment of the iconography of death illustrates the rich potential in that field. As all these and other studies show, religious doctrines and understandings of the meaning of death had to be culturally constructed and reinforced through language and artifact. The churches, states, and within them the various orders and groups with special interests, all helped to elaborate a rich corpus of death imagery as well as ritual—all of which served to orient the emotions as well as beliefs of their people. With these observations in mind, we should examine changing forms in the discourse and material culture of death not simply as evidence of changing "attitudes," but as cultural forms which sought to reframe death, to assert new structures of experience and the moral authority of those who stood behind these forms.

But what exactly did these objects, words, and rituals mean to those people? Here the anthropological perspective, whether historically or ethnographically focused, often discovers a less unidirectional flow of meaning. Local communities and even individuals may have their own agenda, and reappropriate symbols for their own ends. In this respect death takes part in the more general dialectic between local and "official" religion (see for example Brown 1981; Christian 1981; Taylor 1989; Badone, in press). Whether and to what extent local communities or lower classes are successful in maintaining their own interpretation of Church generated symbols probably depends on their general degree of cultural autonomy. Confraternities, cited by Le Goff as examples of the penetrating power of the Church, well illustrate the variation. In various parts of Europe, and at various times, local confraternities have been bastions of anticlericalism and generally thorns in the side of the institutional Church. Elsewhere, in Ireland for example, where they were most often introduced under the auspices of the powerful bishops and parish priests of the late nineteenth century, confraternities extended clerical power. The cultural construction of death

takes place within, and must be examined in the context of, this general dialectic.

Power and authority could not be derived from such symbolic activities as rituals if they were not powerful in their own right. Here, of course, the anthropological tradition is strongest, drawing upon a rich corpus of approaches to understanding and to some extent explaining the conceptual and emotional power of symbols. But in Europe as elsewhere, symbols are typically sought by anthropologists in obvious ritual contexts. When it comes to death, they are not difficult to find and are, in some cases, strikingly enough "Other" to command anthropological attention (as in the second burial rites of rural Greece). Does the obvious draw of such occasions, however, blind us to the less ritually contextualized, but no less powerful, symbol? Death customs afford some obvious examples here, for the lasting significance of particular deaths rests on the cult of memory and not simply on church services (for example, masses for the dead). The cult of relics (see Peter Brown 1981) is an interesting example of the dialectic between political/religious authority and local needs and beliefs. But what of personal relics: relics whose power lies not in miraculous and de-personalized charisma, but in their ability to evoke and sustain memory and hence the "presence" of the deceased. Catholic culture in Europe has devised many versions of this keepsake, such as the memorial cards which the Irish and other Catholics give out to friends, neighbors, and relatives on the occasion of a death. There are photographs which may or may not be placed in an explicitly religious context. In some parts of Europe, for example, it is customary to include a photo of the deceased on the gravestone. The gravestone is the site of familial and individual (rather than communal) ritual, and so is the bedroom, parlor, or kitchen, where such photos or other renditions of the dead might take their place in a range of icons. Whether explicitly religious or not, the character of such objects and icons as cultural items must be interpreted in the light of the broader character of human/object and human/image relations in the culture in question. Thus the Southern Italian (for example) Catholic whose attention is not only directed by certain beliefs and doctrines, but by a typical use of object and image, must experience the personal memento or image of the deceased from within such a framework.

In this regard the Romantic cult of death that spread through Protestant as well as Catholic Europe and America in the nineteenth century is of particular interest. In regard to symbolism, there was in that phenomenon a simultaneous self-consciousness and

self-deception. The former is evident in the explicit character of the indigenous theory of symbolism, if you will. Popular literature instructed the reader not only in the romantic act but in the romantic feeling. Vulgar versions of the theory of associations taught any literate reader that objects and images were "symbols" which evoked and influenced emotional states. Poetry and story were replete with examples of the proper response not only to death but to the symbols in which death in general and deceased individuals were incorporated. Such discourse worked on two levels. As language and thought, it provided key categories and terms through which experience could be organized. Reading the poem about the dead baby gave the reader a template through which she could handle personal loss, and there is evidence (letters and verse sent in by readers) that these works did in fact perform such a cultural function. But such pieces of language also served to orient the reader toward non-linguistic "frames": the plethora of objects and images whose relations with people were so much a central concern of the period.

The importance of discourse comes up in less mass-culturally constructed examples, of course, and in very many religious traditions. There are the stories one tells about the dead; "they are alive," we are frequently reminded, "as long as they live in our memories." Once again, while the act is personal, the propensity to perform it may be cultural: to tell stories in general, and to tell stories about the dead in particular. Parallels with larger religious traditions may be important in this regard. One religious tradition of varying importance in Christian churches and sects is the exemplar tale. Beyond the Bible, there are the lives of the saints: stories which instruct. But to what degree are such tendencies more broadly present, in not necessarily religious, but still exemplary, texts such as ancestor tales? African comparisons may be interesting here. We can ask, for example, what happens to European ancestors, are they remembered individually or do they merge into a nameless population as in "the souls in purgatory"?

These and other questions arise once we take up the death as opportunity perspective, and focus our attention on the construction of meaning and its relation to the generation of power see (Asad 1983). The range of evidence considered and interpretations offered by the authors in this issue suggests the fertility of an approach to this problem which is at once comparative and interdisciplinary.

In her survey of archaeological approaches to mortuary remains, Janet Levy reminds us that the work of anthropologically minded archaeologists has

combined various of the perspectives and methods of both anthropology and history. Naturally enough, archaeologists have always paid close attention to the material remains of death. The treatment of the deceased themselves has long been an essential and indeed obvious category of evidence for archaeology, and mortuary monuments are among the most durable as well as spectacular human constructions. Insofar as they have attempted to interpret such remains in the light of anthropological theories and interests, archaeologists have recently brought to bear precisely the sociological and symbolic perspectives mentioned above. The fragmentary nature of the evidence leaves much room for interpretation, but the central archaeological concern to "explain variability, both in time and space" provides a useful corrective to any cultural anthropological tendency to focus only within a restricted geographical and temporal frame. Indeed, the typical archaeological concern with long-term political development apparently combines well with an appreciation of the indirectness of symbolic representation in the several of the works cited by Levy. In such analyses

mortuary remains [are interpreted] as symbolic codes rather than as direct reflections of social organization [which] may both reflect fundamental cultural values and serve as manipulable symbols utilized in social conflicts.

A nice example is Shennan's (1982) argument that neolithic European monumental burials can be interpreted as efforts by an elite to

manipulate a communal mortuary monument to support their dominance by symbolically masking and negating it, while later the single barrow burials serve to support elite position by openly glorifying it (Levy, this issue).

Clearly the analysis of elite sponsored mortuary monuments easily accommodates the "death as opportunity" perspective.

The remaining essays deal with contemporary European communities and societies, though with due consideration to the historical dimension of mortuary practices. While several themes arise in all three essays (for example, the contested identity of the dead, the relation of emigration to death, the metaphoric role of death in coming to terms with historical change in the character of the community) some important differences also emerge, some of which can be attributed to the distinctive religious and political contexts, as well as to the local characters, of the respective communities.

As Gwen Kennedy Neville points out, the relation of the living to the dead poses a different set of

problems for Protestants than for Catholics. I would add, however, that the attitudes of the various sects and churches have certainly differed on this score. In the nineteenth century the Romantic cult of death, as I argued above, brought a thinly disguised Catholic version of death and memory to many segments of Protestant English and American society. In the case of the Scottish Presbyterian border burghs, however, religious barriers apparently provided some resistance against such popular cultural movements. That is not to say, however, that such communities cannot make good use of death and the dead. According to Neville, towns like Selkirk are possessed of a very well-defined sense of communal self, but their perception of a shared and distinctive history gains periodic regeneration through a celebration called the "common riding," wherein the historical community is acted out in a dramatic pageant. In the process, the shared experience and identity involved in "belonging" to the community is most emotionally established through memorializing the war dead.

Yet this symbolic enactment is far from straightforward and in effect mediates contradictions at the heart of communal, and indeed Scottish, identity. For the actual battle whose martyrs are celebrated in the pageant was fought against England, while the dead of living memory fell—like so many Scots—defending or extending the British Empire. The two categories are conjoined by means of symbolic sleight of hand, however, which rephrases all oppositions in terms of an adjustable "us" versus "them": a history of continuous patriotism. This version of community is empowered through death and clearly redounds to the benefit of the British state. At the same time, from the local perspective the pageant finds meaning in a history of losses, even affording the opportunity to link death with the experience of emigration, perhaps the greatest threat to the continued existence of the community. What of personal loss, however? Perhaps the non-religious, or civil-religious character of the ceremonies allows these Scots the opportunity to evoke individual as well as communal ancestors.

Emigration is also at the heart of the Irish experience, but political consciousness and identity has had rather a different history there than in Scotland. Catholicism is the other salient difference in so far as death is concerned. Whereas one might suppose that this conjunction of religion and politics would make for a relatively straightforward symbolic appropriation of death, historical reality reveals a more complex dialectic. I present the Irish case as an instance of a continuous struggle for control between the Church and the people, to some extent subsumed in the con-

test for prominence between wake and funeral. While the Church has to a large degree succeeded in "civilizing" the Irish wake and elaborating the priest-controlled funeral, various sorts of communities have retained older forms for new purposes, or even reappropriated the pomp of Church rites for their own ends: witness the IRA funeral.

But the battle over the construction of death goes beyond ritual to include the way the dead are spoken of and remembered. Interestingly, that contest is between communities more than between individuals and the community, for a powerful egalitarianism seems to reign in the memorialization of the dead. While the very poorest families might erect a simple, even homemade gravestone, there is very little variation in the size and decoration of the memorial stones which fill the local churchyard in that corner of Donegal. That is not to say that special memorials to the dead cannot be important, a heroic moral identity (rather than local success) may be given relatively monumental recognition and even connected to any number of older heroes and battles.

In Greece, on the other hand, the material representation of the deceased is a vital issue, and a field of contention for death as opportunity. According to Dubisch,

... there is a difference between death as an opportunity for material display which emphasizes the continuing social identity of individual and family and death as an occasion for the affirmation of broader communal values and for the assertion of the transitoriness of the material world.

While the rural Greek custom of "second burial" in a common village ossuary (Danforth and Tsiaras 1982) would seem the perfect expression of communal egalitarianism, Dubisch notes a tension between those values and others communicated through the relative lavishness of familial mourning display. One wonders

to what degree this can be attributed to the "penetration of the market economy" or was it rather long present as an inner tension there as elsewhere?

Dubisch addresses these questions through a comparative study that takes seriously Levy's injunction to attend to the material culture of death. Her exploration turns up a wide range of practice and while some may be explained as regional variation, certainly the evidence presented by Dubisch does suggest that class is also a major factor. Even in rural towns and villages, social differentiation turns up in the cemetery as elsewhere, while in Athens in particular, gravestones have long been opportunities to express not only status but cultural allegiance. Thus, through the nineteenth-century elite Athenian graves echo the motifs, and possibly the values, of the "Western" or "European" Romantic cult of death. Throughout Greece, however, she finds a clear historical trend in favor of individual display, and not just in the ritual moment, but in the permanent memorializing of the dead.

As Dubisch points out, individualism is hardly peculiar to Greece and has had an impact on death practices in much of Europe. On the other hand, as these essays show, there is always a great collective potential in death, for no historical process erodes its fundamental power and hence usefulness. Witness Hungary. On June 16, 1989, several hundred thousand people assembled in Hero's Square in Budapest for what commentators call "the most important political event in Hungary since the revolution of 1948." Imre Nagy, the ignominiously executed leader of the 1956 uprising, was disinterred along with five compatriots from their unmarked graves. Amid great ceremony and intensely emotional display they were given a second burial, and their revolution a second birth.

NOTES

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¹There are clearly many other fruitful perspectives to take on the anthropology of death, including a reflexive meditation on the ethnographer's position vis-a-vis the death of "other" and "self" (see Fabian 1973). A good general overview of a wide range of perspectives and literatures on the anthropology of death, as well as related disciplinary writings, can be found in Palgi and Abramowitch 1984. An invaluable guide to the anthropology of death can be found in Huntington and Metcalf 1979.

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