

Introduction. Corpses in society: about human remains, necro-politics, necro-economy and the legacy of mass violence

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The visible presence of human remains within societies is not a new phenomenon.¹ Whether these remains have been placed on view for religious reasons (through the creation of ossuaries or the use of relics, for example), for the purposes of experimental science (in particular through the use and preservation of human tissues and skeletons by the disciplines of medicine, biology and physical anthropology) or indeed for those of the humanities and social sciences (through the study and display of mummies or Maori heads in Western museums, for instance), many examples attest to a long history of the display of human remains and even of entire dead bodies. This visibility and presence have generated new thinking regarding their display – whether whole corpses or constituent parts – driven by an emerging host of ethical questions, giving rise to various legal measures and codes of good practice aimed at its organisation and regulation. A paradigmatic example of the changes that have occurred in terms of both public sensitivities and the legal situation is provided by the passing of the UK's 2004 Human Tissue Act and the creation of the Human Tissue Authority, which aim to oversee the transportation, storage and use of human bodies, organs and tissues in the context of scientific research, education and transplant surgery.

The difficult questions posed by the atrocities of the twentieth century have added to the issues raised by corpses and human remains preserved outside of funerary spaces. Genocides and

episodes of mass violence have, in this area as in so many others, overturned existing symbolic and social orders, giving rise to new configurations that are emblematic of the dark side of our modernity.² Chief among these is the presence of very large numbers of corpses in countries including, but not limited to, Namibia, Armenia, the former USSR, Spain, Poland, Ukraine, Cambodia, Darfur, Guatemala and Bosnia. This intentional production of the civilian dead on a mass scale has posed difficult questions regarding the status that should be granted to their corpses or other bodily remains, most often once the violence is over. The aim of the present volume, then, is precisely to examine this status and the factors at stake in its construction.

Once episodes of mass violence and genocides come to an end, the resulting human remains become the subject of numerous and varied forms of investment. They are claimed by families and states and subjected to the attention of international organisations and the media. They may of course be forgotten, but they may equally be instrumentalised, placed in memorials or, to the contrary, reburied far from the memorials built to commemorate the atrocities. They may be individualised or, conversely, collectivised, and in some cases placed under the authority of an institution or a court of law. They are often sacralised and thus used to legitimise political or religious power. They can also function as substitutes for other bodies to whom it has not been possible to give the same degree of care, either because they have not been searched for or discovered, or indeed because they have been destroyed. Which actors, then, are involved in the reinscription within societies of human remains resulting from mass violence and genocide? What is at stake in the way these remains are treated, and what are the logics that govern this treatment? It is the aim of the present volume to attempt an answer to these questions.

This volume is part of a series of publications that present the findings of the research programme entitled 'Corpses of Mass Violence and Genocide'.³ These publications have, first, set out preliminary methodological questions for the study of the treatment of corpses in configurations of extreme violence,⁴ then considered the fate of corpses during the phase of destruction, that is to say at the time of the massacres themselves,⁵ before finally examining the search for bodies and, where possible, their identification, focusing on the 'forensic turn' in the last part of the twentieth century that appears to have been a key development.⁶

Although they might seem quite distinct, these three stages in the treatment of corpses – destruction, search and identification,

return to society – are closely linked, and it is crucial to consider them together in order to fully understand the present volume's dealing with the third phase. In this respect, *Human Remains in Society* represents not only the logical continuation, but also the culmination of our research. It is the fruit of a conference held at the University of Manchester in September 2014 that sought to investigate the legacy of mass crimes, with a particular focus on understanding the different mechanisms and logics involved in the reappearance of human remains. *Human Remains in Society* therefore aims to concentrate on the treatment and the eventual fate of corpses and/or human remains once they have been exhumed and in some cases identified, in particular analysing the technical, political, religious, emotional and social investment placed in the practices governing their return.

Our research programme has from the outset been highly interdisciplinary, involving anthropologists, historians, jurists and criminologists. As the reader will see on consulting the chapters in this volume, this aspect of our work has been retained and even extended to literary studies and archaeology. The chapters brought together here, and more generally the research carried out by specialists representing all the research programme's covered continents, approach different forms of extreme violence and its legacies and allow us to make a number of observations.

First, it seems that the main aspects of contemporary practices of reinscribing human remains within the ordinary life of peacetime societies are invariably still structured by the threefold register of religious, scientific and political considerations. Analysis of ritual and religious practices allows us in the first instance to distinguish their extreme flexibility. For these practices are often novel, the result of various syntheses and personal initiatives echoing the religious and political cultures surrounding each specific case under study. The flexibility of funerary rituals seems in this respect to show that it is possible to restructure practices of reburial and mourning using a highly syncretic approach. The world's religions have sought to control the minds and bodies of the living and the dead alike by giving extremely detailed prescriptions for burial rites, laying down laws on exhumation and establishing numerous taboos around corpses. Yet, while the major monotheisms appear in most of the volume's case studies, they do not state any clear religious policies regarding corpses en masse. For instance, Orthodox Jewish law, the Halakha, which deals in minute detail with the treatment of individuals who have died of natural causes, proved incapable of applying the same rules to the situations that arose from the Holocaust. This becomes

very clear from reading the chapter by David Deutsch who, by analysing the Orthodox rabbinic *Responsas* (decisions) made in the decades following the Second World War on questions relating to the treatment of bodies and human remains from the Holocaust, shows that interpretations of Jewish law have been highly variable. Elsewhere in Europe, Bosnian Islam has also revealed itself to be highly flexible in accommodating funerals *in absentia* or allowing women to attend and participate in mortuary rituals after the Srebrenica massacre, in which all the town's Muslim men were murdered and their bodies hidden for years.⁷ In Indonesia, meanwhile, at the locations of mass graves from the massacres of communists in the 1960s, Muslim or Buddhist rituals were replaced by various forms of religious syncretism.⁸ More recently, in Rwanda, Evangelical churches have rushed into the breach left open by the nervousness of the country's Catholic Church, some of whose members were caught up in accusations of participation in the genocide, thereby offering a space of charismatic renewal in Christian ritual practice.⁹ In all of these cases it is as if the sheer scale of the murder and its unique nature prevented an extension of the usual funerary rituals to the sites of mass graves and to excessive numbers of corpses, making innovation necessary.

Analysing funerary rituals also allows light to be shed on the main actors in these practices, and sometimes even to loose groupings of people that could be thought of, in Pierre Nora's words, as 'environments of memory', at times working as networks, which bring together survivors, families of victims (which may cover several generations), activists representing various political causes, journalists and so on.¹⁰ This milieu of actors is often composed of activists who have turned the exhumation of bodies into a political struggle, human rights campaigners who see it as an important tool of transitional justice,¹¹ forensic scientists working for international organisations, national institutions – such as the police or army – or non-governmental organisations, people living near sites of disinterments or reinterments, victims' families and media representatives. The exhumation of the mass graves from the Franco era in Spain seems to provide the most highly developed example of these groupings,¹² where a part of public space has been appropriated in a continuous or intermittent fashion and within it forms of interplay have been created that are highly revealing of more general social and political tensions.

Treatments of corpses, and their uses, may also vary within a single geographical space according to the period and context in

question. This is shown in the chapter by Gaetano Dato, which, over an extended period (from 1920 to 1970), examines the Julian March, the border region between Italy and Yugoslavia. He clearly demonstrates how, from 1914 to the 1950s, commemorations of the various victim groups of irredentist conflicts, anti-Semitic persecution and repression against Resistance fighters to Nazi occupation have brought into play a vast palette of rituals that are not always primarily religious in character, but always eminently political, in a context in which the inscription of corpses within a framework of identity is crucial in justifying the region's political and national affiliation. Similar issues are addressed in the chapter by Devlin M. Scofield, which examines the transfer of the remains of eleven members of the French Resistance to Alsace at the beginning of the 1950s, who had been murdered by the Gestapo in the Baden region. These bodies became the subject of a complex pattern of investment in the fraught context of early Franco-German reconciliation in two border regions with similar cultural characteristics (religion, language) but with opposing political histories. Here, too, religion and politics go hand-in-hand.

The study of the various scientific practices underpinning the social reinscription of the human remains resulting from mass violence (through techniques of identification, classification and display) focuses on the historical configurations that presided over the birth of physical anthropology, and which are inextricably linked with genocides and crimes against humanity. One has the feeling that a spectre hovers above a number of chapters in this volume: that of racial anthropology as it developed in the West at the end of the nineteenth century, a discipline that subjected bodies and human remains – in particular skulls – to study using instruments to measure and compare them, in order to justify hierarchies between different human 'races'. The scientific assumptions that form the basis of studies of the evolution of humanity have since changed following a de-racialisation of physical anthropology in the wake of the Holocaust. Even so, at the end of the 1950s, certain French forensic experts and anthropologists still considered that, in the case of exhumations of the Nazi concentration camps' mass graves, science was able to distinguish a French skeleton from a German or Italian one.¹³ While the forensic scientists whose work is analysed in this volume no longer have a racialist agenda, genocides and episodes of mass violence are still both the source and the product of their knowledge. This dark memory of physical anthropology is displayed in

the chapter by David M. Anderson and Paul J. Lane on the fate of the skeletons of Mau Mau insurgents in Kenya, and similarly presented in the chapter by Vilho Amukwaya Shigwedha on the Hereros and Namas of Namibia murdered by German colonial troops. The collection of skeletons of these natives – whose return from Germany is still ongoing – was established at the behest of Eugen Fischer, the master of German racial science and the mentor of Josef Mengele, the infamous chief doctor of Auschwitz.

Museums, universities and anatomy institutes in Europe, the United States and throughout the world have thus inherited immense collections of osteological specimens, corpses and human remains that were patiently assembled in the general context of the birth of physical anthropology; these collections helped to consolidate these institutions' reputations and prestige, for a long time constituting their true *raison d'être*, even if they are much less openly exhibited and promoted today. The University of Berkeley in California, for instance, still holds a veritable ossuary composed of the remains of Native Americans robbed from tombs in California and elsewhere.¹⁴ Along with the question of the 'ghosts' of pre-war racial anthropology, then, arises the emergence of a positivist and scientific vision of the human body for which anthropology served as a vector.

The constitution of these collections thus forces us to point out the ambiguous role of cultural institutions and museums in not only preserving but also confiscating and appropriating human remains, to the extent of locking them away in safes inaccessible to the outside world. This is precisely what John Harries reveals in his chapter devoted to the presence/absence of a Canadian First Nation tribe, the Beothuk, the skeleton of one of whose members was displayed, then hidden and finally shut away in the safe of a local museum in Newfoundland. From this arises the question of the appropriation, or rather of disputes surrounding the appropriation, of human remains. Who has the right to exercise control over them? Which groups or individuals can assume responsibility within the long chain of custody of corpses or body parts? This ethical and legal question once again becomes political, in this way reminding us that the dead remain the subject of vigilant and somewhat anxious governance, and sometimes highly elaborate necro-political strategies.¹⁵ The conflicts around what to do with the bodies that have been recovered also reveal disputes over reappropriation and legitimacy between survivors, victims' families, administrations, states, international organisations and even diaspora communities of exterminated minority groups.

All things considered, it is perhaps more in the field of artistic creativity (whether literary, visual or multi-media), and in particular that of corpses' image production, that a discourse on and questioning of the place of the dead in society currently seems to be developing in the most dynamic way. These forms of creation offer individualised representations of feelings, allowing the disturbing materiality of death to be kept at a distance, while at the same time producing a particular form of intelligibility created by the artist. This is shown in the chapter by Ayala Maurer-Prager, who examines the question of intimate proximity to corpses and bones in Rwanda based on the study of texts with a dual documentary and literary character. Comparing the writings of the journalists and memorialists Philip Gourevitch and Jean Hatzfeld, read alongside the novel by Boubacar Boris Diop, *Murambi, The Book of Bones*, Maurer-Prager reveals how the survival of Rwandans who escaped the massacres has been inscribed within a simultaneous relation of their contact with and their distancing of themselves from the masses of corpses produced by the genocide. Another question, which follows from the appropriation and control of the dead, is that of the rights to images, in a period when the display of human remains is taking a new turn and leaving visual taboos, such as those concerning the bodies of dead soldiers in the trenches during the First World War, far behind. Indeed, images of corpses are becoming an integral part of curatorial representations of mass violence. Some have become iconic, such as those taken at Bergen-Belsen and Buchenwald by the photographers and cameramen of the American and British forces.¹⁶ The last three decades have consequently seen the production of numerous works of art that examine the place of corpses and human remains in societies marked by extreme violence. Among them is the work of Anselm Kiefer, who delves into the cannibalistic nature of Western societies in paintings such as *Osiris and Isis* (1985–87) and the highly explicit and figurative work of the Belarusian painter Mikhail Savitsky, who reconstructs his experience of the Nazi extermination camps. While the functions of these works are primarily artistic and metaphysical, they are nevertheless able to generate a sense of immediacy, a 'reality effect', which scientific analyses can often lack. In this respect, documentary films have today become an indispensable part of the process of human bodies' return to society, employing this reality effect and proclaiming a professional and ethical stance that is resolutely non-commercial and independent of the major entertainment and media outlets; they

draw attention in a wider sense to what is a real moral and aesthetic crisis regarding representation of violence.¹⁷ Whether the subject is Bosnia, with the work of Sabina Subasic;¹⁸ Spain, with the work of José Luis Peñafuerte or the photographer Clemente Bernad;¹⁹ Latin America, with the work of Virginia Martinez;²⁰ Rwanda, in the films of Philippe Van Leeuw and Marie-Violaine Brincard;²¹ or Cambodia, including the enormously important work of Riti Panh,²² documentary-makers remain, in this respect, in the avant-garde of representations of extreme violence, in terms of both expressing and analysing this phenomenon.

The involvement of artistic creation in this process raises two sets of questions. The first is linked to the place accorded to (and taken by) technology in the production of a discourse on death and the dead en masse: through the multiplication of images, which seem to assist the multiplication of the corpses themselves, through the competition between amateur and professional image-makers and through the creation of a unique manner of being in the world that combines absence and omnipresence. Social media now plays a dominant role in this process. Representations of reburials and their fluctuating meanings are heavily present, accompanying the constant reconfiguration of the environments of memory mentioned above, following the fluctuations that occur within specific movements and the political situation more generally. Images of bodies and human remains are in this respect creating a new visual culture,²³ as much through the efforts of victims' families using a variety of image-recording devices as through those of the major traditional media sources. These new images clash with those present in popular culture, where the display of corpses in police dramas, horror films and television series centres – almost obsessively – on the figure of the forensic pathologist and the cutting-up of dead bodies.²⁴

The second set of questions is more strictly ethical in nature. Works of fiction, along with photography and film, engage just as directly as religious or scientific practices with the fundamental questions raised by the bringing to light and public display of corpses and human remains with regard to the respect they are owed. These documentaries and works of fiction force us not only to think about the degree to which the dead are objectified, and even the very possibility of the continued existence of an 'individual subject' in the face of mass killing, but also to consider the rights the dead retain over the use of their image and, finally, the extent to which images help to spread and legitimise voyeurism and complacency towards

violence. These are all issues that international law and the various national legislations around the world are still reluctant to address.

A final series of questions relate to the realities and dangers of an instrumentalisation, a 'commodification' of corpses; this was pointed out by the anthropologist Alejandro Castillejo Cuéllar over a decade ago when he was studying the status of the victims of apartheid during the process of transition in South Africa, underlining the extent to which victims have become commodities in an international network of prestige.²⁵ There is no escaping the fact that in situations that follow genocides and extreme violence, human remains – just as much as surviving victims – become 'goods'. As a result, a dual necro-economy comes into being. This consists, first, of a symbolic necro-economy developed on the level of a moral economy,²⁶ which derives its power from the terror generated by the phenomenon of mass killing. This moral economy is established through the selective assignment of defined statuses to individuals or groups (spokesperson, victim, survivor, sons and daughters of ...) that result in the production and accumulation of symbolic capital.²⁷ These varied statuses sometimes give rise to conflicts of appropriation or legitimacy, shedding light on the eminently political nature of the unique form of goods that are human remains.

Second, this necro-economy is more than just symbolic, for it is now monetised and globalised – or well on the way to being globalised, at any rate. It is the product of a free-market logic that feeds off the practices involved in the search for, identification and preservation of bodies, and finally their transformation into heritage, as described in our previous volumes. While the search for and identification of corpses of mass violence and genocide has given rise to a market in forensic expertise,²⁸ as a counterpoint there has sprung a whole industry of 'dark tourism', a 'thanatotourism', along with a leisure and entertainment industry revolving around the creation of permanent displays or temporary exhibitions in museums, as well as dramas, documentaries and publications of all types. Sites of burial and exhumation may in this respect be regarded as symbolic and material 'resource banks', containing a highly varied selection of resources to suit a range of actors who differ radically from one another in terms of their investments. For instance, in the first few years of the post-war period, the people living next to the actual sites of the extermination camps in Poland dug up and sifted through the soil from Treblinka, Sobibór and Bełżec, creating a local gold-panning rush that constituted a final profanation. This is shown in the excellent account given by

Zuzanna Dziuban in her chapter on the spatiality of the death sites in Poland. Yet while these same sites have yielded corpses to be identified and returned to their families, they are also destinations for tour operators and even objects of scientific study for scholars, including the authors of the present volume. The chapter by Caroline Sturdy Colls reveals how, in this respect, the locations of the Holocaust's death camps in Poland constitute sites of symbolic and scientific resources for victims and their descendants, as well as for archaeologists – in the context of the recent development of a specific archaeology of the Holocaust – yet they are also sites of conflict between different religious and political authorities. It is thus possible to see how, within this curious necro-economy – and often in the name of survivors or their descendants, not to mention justice and human rights – competition can sometimes develop over access to these resources.

In the final analysis, we still need to work out exactly how the moral economies generated by the return of the dead to society fit into contemporary major economic and (geo)political world orders. It is all the more crucial and urgent to understand this relationship within the current context of the globalisation of the treatment of large numbers of dead bodies. This is a context in which there exists not only situations of intentional mass killing, but also countless recent experiences of disasters, whether natural or industrial, from Hurricane Katrina and the 2011 tsunami in Japan to the Savar building collapse in Bangladesh in 2013, the recent Ebola epidemic or multiple air crashes such as the Malaysia Airlines flight MH17 in Ukraine or the Germanwings Barcelona–Düsseldorf crash in the French Alps, which serve to remind us of the reality and deep significance of this issue.

Notes

- 1 Translated from the authors' French by Jon Hensher.
- 2 J. Assayag, 'La face obscure de la modernité', *L'Homme*, 170:2 (2004), 232–43. URL: www.cairn.info/revue-l-homme-2004-2-page-232.htm (accessed 5 May 2015).
- 3 ERC Starting Grant no. 283–617. We would like once again to thank the European Research Council for the support they have given to this research programme.
- 4 J.-M. Dreyfus and É. Anstett (eds), *Human Remains and Mass Violence: Methodological Approaches* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2014).

- 5 É. Anstett and J.-M. Dreyfus (eds), *Destruction and Human Remains: Disposal and Concealment in Genocide and Mass Violence* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2014).
- 6 É. Anstett and J.-M. Dreyfus (eds), *Human Remains and Identification: Mass Violence, Genocide and the 'Forensic Turn'* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2015).
- 7 L. J. Nettelfield and S. Wagner, *Srebrenica in the Aftermath of Genocide* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014).
- 8 G. Fealy and K. McGregor, 'Nahdlatul Ulama and the killings of 1965–66: religion, politics and remembrance', *Indonesia*, 89 (2010), 37–60.
- 9 T. Longman, 'Church politics and the genocide in Rwanda', *Journal of Religion in Africa*, 31:2 (2001), 163–86.
- 10 P. Nora (ed.), *Realms of Memory: Conflicts and Divisions* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), p. 1.
- 11 For discussion of transitional justice in Argentina, see S. Garibian, 'Ghosts also die: resisting disappearance through the "right to the truth" and the *Juicios por la verdad* in Argentina', *Journal of International Criminal Justice*, 12:3 (2014), 515–38.
- 12 F. Ferrándiz, 'Exhuming the defeated: civil war mass graves in 21st century Spain', *American Ethnologist*, 40:1 (2013), 38–54.
- 13 J.-M. Dreyfus, 'Renationalizing bodies? The French search mission for the corpses of deportees in Germany, 1946–58'; in J.-M. Dreyfus and É. Anstett (eds), *Human Remains and Mass Violence: Methodological Approaches* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2014), pp. 129–45.
- 14 T. Platt, *Grave Matters: Excavating California's Buried Past* (Berkeley, CA: Heyday, 2011).
- 15 For a general discussion of this issue of control, see F. Stepputat (ed.), *Governing the Dead: Sovereignty and the Politics of Dead Bodies* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2014).
- 16 On Bergen-Belsen, in particular, see S. Bargett and D. Cesarani (eds), *Belsen 1945: New Historical Perspectives* (London: Vallentine Mitchell, 2006).
- 17 For a discussion of images showing the Rwandan genocide and its commemoration, see N. Réra, *Rwanda, entre crise morale et malaise esthétique: Les médias, la photographie et le cinéma à l'épreuve du génocide des Tutsi (1994–2014)* (Dijon: Les Presses du Réel, 2014).
- 18 S. Subasic, *Earth Promised Sky* (Documentary, France, 52 mins, 2003).
- 19 J. L. Peñafuerte, *Los caminos de la memoria* (Documentary, Spain, 96 mins, 2011); for an overview of Clemente Bernad's work, see <http://clemente.format.com> (accessed 1 May 2015).
- 20 V. Martínez, *Las manos en la tierra* (Documentary, Uruguay, 52 mins, 2010).
- 21 P. Van Leeuw, *Le jour où Dieu est parti en voyage* (Drama, Belgium, 1 hour 34 mins, 2008); M.-V. Brinard, *Au nom du père, de tous, du ciel* (Documentary, France, 52 mins, 2011).
- 22 See R. Panh, *La terre des âmes errantes* (Documentary, Cambodia–France, 100 mins, 2000); *S21, la machine de mort Khmère rouge* (Documentary, France, 101 mins, 2003); and *Duch, le Maître des forges de l'enfer* (Documentary, France, 100 mins, 2012).

- 23 F. Ferrándiz and A. Baer, 'Digital memory: the visual recording of mass grave exhumations in contemporary Spain', *Forum Qualitative Social Research*, 9:3 (2008), 1–23.
- 24 M. Moisseeff, 'Requiem pour une morte: aftermath (Cerdà 1994)', *Techniques et Culture*, 60 (2013), 160–79.
- 25 A. C. Cuéllar, 'Unraveling silence: violence, memory and the limits of anthropology's craft', *Dialectal Anthropology*, 29:2 (2005), 159–80.
- 26 D. Fassin and R. Rechtman, *L'empire du traumatisme: Enquête sur la condition de victime* (Paris: Flammarion, 2011).
- 27 G. Gatti, *Surviving Forced Disappearance in Argentina and Uruguay: Identity and Meaning* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014).
- 28 C. Merli and T. Buck, 'Forensic identification and identity politics in 2004 post-tsunami Thailand: negotiating dissolving boundaries', *Human Remains and Violence*, 1:1 (2015), 3–22.

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