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HISTORIOGRAPHICAL REVIEW

NEW LIFE IN THE MODERN CULTURAL HISTORY OF DEATH*

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ABSTRACT. This essay presents a critical overview of recent literature in English on the modern cultural history of death. In order to locate new developments, it charts the evolution of the field from the 1970s until today and distinguishes between French and Anglophone strands in the historiography. A selection of studies published between 2005 and 2015 exemplifies a revival in recent scholarship that hangs on four main innovations: the abandonment of grand narratives of modernization and secularization; an interdisciplinary integration of political, cultural, and intellectual history; greater attention to the individual; and the expansion of the field beyond Europe and North America. Thus, today the history of death is both local and global, public and private, personal and universal.

Everyone dies, but dying too has a history. Although death is universal and timeless, the way in which it is thought of, and dealt with, varies in time and place. Being by their nature bound to tradition, the rites of death evolve at a relatively slow pace and can be easy to grasp. They are also tied to morality, memory, religion, and kinship, and to issues of origin and destiny that lie at the root of our definitions of civilization. Thus, the history of death presents an opportunity to explore what it means to be human – an opportunity that historians have approached from different viewpoints. In particular, cultural historians have used death to illustrate the historical transformation of culture in the modern period.

Over the last decade, the cultural history of death has flourished with the publication of a number of studies that have advanced the field beyond its foundations in the 1970s. The aim of this essay is to situate those recent developments within a longer perspective. Given that a comprehensive survey of new literature would be impossible in a work of this length, I have selected eight books in

English through which to assess how far the field has come. Published in the period of 2005–15, the chosen works provide a synthesis of new approaches, subjects, and narratives. In order to trace the 'genealogy' of recent contributions, this essay has two parts: the first covers a group of foundational studies written between the 1970s and 1990s; the second is dedicated to a review of selected literature that was published after 2005. Common to all works is that they engage with the idea of modernity and use death to show how, in the modern era, culture has changed or stayed the same.

I

As a field, the cultural history of death might be said to have originated in France, where historians of the *Annales* school adopted death as a core subject of the history of mentalities because of its capacity to express unconscious beliefs.[1] Together with Pierre Chaunu, François Lebrun, and others, Michelle Vovelle founded a 'new history of death' in the early 1970s. His work described a process of de-christianization whereby sacred beliefs gave way to secular attitudes to death, which he attributed to a Marxist definition of the rise of class consciousness.[2] A markedly different approach was adopted by another French historian, Philippe Ariès, first in a collection of essays of 1974, and later in a lengthy survey translated into English as *The hour of our death*.[3] As an autodidact, Ariès was unencumbered by the chronological and geographical limitations adopted by professional historians, and addressed the history of death in the Western world over two millennia. He divided this period into four successive stages on the basis of dominant attitudes to death. For Ariès, the 'tamed death' of the Middle Ages gave way in the early modern period to an increased fear of dying or to a consciousness of 'the death of the self'. In turn, the nineteenth century was the golden age of mourning or of the 'death of the other'. In contrast, the twentieth century is taken to be a period of 'death denied' in which death went from being an intimate experience within the bosom of the family to a secular and medical event. Ariès was a Catholic of the traditional Right who resented modernity and the loss of clerical power, and who saw the marginalization of death as a symptom of the breakdown of communities and the rise of individualism.[4] He was influenced by a seminal essay of 1955 by the British anthropologist Geoffrey Gorer entitled 'The pornography of death', which drew on Sigmund Freud's theory of repression to argue that the trauma of the Great War led to a denial of death. Hence, in Gorer's view, death replaced sex as the ultimate taboo. Another key influence on

Ariès was Michel Foucault's *The Birth of the Clinic* (1963), which linked the removal of the dead from the spaces of the living to the scientific mindset of the Enlightenment.[5]

The two French pioneers of the field, the conservative Ariès and the Marxist Vovelle, engaged in a lengthy *Historikerstreit* in which Ariès defended the 'denial of death' thesis, while Vovelle argued for a more complex relationship between death and modernity.[6] Crucially, although Vovelle viewed secularization in a positive light, and Ariès saw as it as a disastrous loss of tradition, they agreed on the modern decline of religion. Their lasting legacy, however, lies in the broad nature of their approaches, rather than in the content of their theories. Confronted with the impossibility of looking directly at the experience of dying, both took the history of death to mean the history of *attitudes to* death.[7] They adopted micro-functions rather than large historical events as their main areas of enquiry, and tackled wide chronological spans and geographical areas – parameters which were to shape much of the subsequent literature.

Among French historians of death, Ariès has had perhaps the greatest impact on Anglophone scholarship, in part because his work was translated into English. In spite of its far-Right traditionalism, *The hour of our death* became a touchstone in the historiography.[8] When the field expanded in the 1980s in conjunction with a growing interest in the social sciences, historians adopted Ariès's four phases as an organizational framework, even when they rejected the more simplistic elements of his thinking.[9] That periodization directed the choice of subjects, which in turn reinforced existing paradigms; as evidenced, for instance, by the abundance of literature on the extravagance of Victorian funerary customs.[10] However, it is also significant that *The hour of our death* has had as many detractors as admirers with critics attacking the book for its neat chronologies, its European perspective, its focus on elites, and its treatment of culture as a self-contained process.[11] In effect, the field has advanced on these four fronts, using Ariès more as a strawman, than as a model.

Neither Ariès nor Vovelle devoted much attention to war, on the basis that the 'normal' conditions of peacetime were more useful in showing long-term change.[12] Although Ariès adopted Gorer's view of the First World War as the beginning of the era of 'death denied', he did not develop that idea in a way that might have contributed to a greater understanding of the relationship between war and death. In contrast, the cultural history of the First World War has boomed since the

publication in 1975 of Paul Fussell's *The Great War and modern memory*, which characterized the war as the beginning of modern consciousness. The field has engendered a wealth of writing on death, grief, and commemoration in Britain and other European countries, much of it written in English. This Anglophone literature has followed a different course from that adopted in French histories of death, which has had equal, if not greater, impact on the literature in English. For example, in an influential essay of 1981, the British historian David Cannadine sought to disprove the simplistic narrative of progression, as supported by Gorer and Ariès, from a 'celebrated' to a 'forbidden' death by demonstrating that 'inter-war Britain was more obsessed with death than any other period in recent history'.[13] Far from disappearing during the First World War, the significance of death, Cannadine argues, was magnified by mass slaughter. As Sigmund Freud observed, wartime losses meant that death could no longer be denied, nor could repressive attitudes be sustained.[14] Modernization brought longer life expectancy, but also mechanized warfare, which interrupted the gradual decline of death rates since the eighteenth century. Thus, Cannadine exposes the paradox of death in the modern period; that is, in peacetime the dead faded from view, but in wartime they dominated the public imagination. In fact, given these opposing trends, the histories of death tend to run along two parallel lines that focus on times of war or peace.[15] In *Sites of memory, sites of mourning: the Great War in European cultural history* (1995), the American historian Jay Winter attempts to unite the two strands by exploring how individuals experienced mass death. Drawing on Pierre Nora's *Les lieux de mémoire* (1984–92), Winter shows how 'sites of memory' can also be 'sites of mourning' – an approach that illustrates how the growing field of memory studies fed into the histories of death.[16] He disputes Fussell's characterization of the First World War as the birth of the modern memory, pointing instead to the persistence of older mourning traditions.[17] Winter's efforts to integrate modern experiences of mass death into longer historical patterns has had a significant influence on other authors.[18]

In his 1981 essay, Cannadine also highlighted how, after the First World War, a denial of personal grief for the loss of a husband, father, or son could co-exist with a public recognition of the death of soldiers *en masse*.[19] For its part, the work of George L. Mosse demonstrated how the commemoration of fallen soldiers flourished after the war and ultimately dominated the interwar

ideologies of Fascist Italy, Nazi Germany, and other European authoritarian regimes.[20] As national rituals compensated for the concealment of private mourning, public claims that the dead were ever present in the memory of the nation ran counter to Gorer's 'denial of death'. Moreover, despite Ariès's view of the unstoppable advancement of individualism, modern death continued to be the site of struggles between individual and collective interests, as anti-individualistic ideologies such as Communism, Fascism and National Socialism cast death rites as collective events rather than matters of personal choice.

In short it might be said that two historiographical currents, with origins in the mid-1970s, shaped the cultural history of death as it exists today: on one hand, the French history of mentalities explored peacetime attitudes to death across the *longue durée*; on the other hand, a largely Anglophone literature looked at the impact of the First World War in terms of continuity and change. Over the last forty years, the field has expanded from the history of mentalities to encompass religious, urban, emotional, military, and medical history, among other areas. Whereas the French tradition was influential in terms of approach, English-language works on the First World War anticipated key questions in recent literature around individual beliefs, the impact of modernization, and the treatment of death as an independent cultural phenomenon.

II

A crucial aim in recent literature is to abandon simple narratives of modernization, while still accounting for the changes brought by modernity. To this end, historians engage with the work of anthropologists who examine death as a timeless human experience, and of social scientists who demonstrate how, instead of disappearing from public discourse in the modern period, death was handled within the fields of medicine or the law. They also emphasize factors that are relatively stable or continuous between the modern and pre-modern periods, and show how death was used to re-establish old traditions on modern terms. Clearly, attitudes to death offer an ideal vehicle through which to demolish modernizing narratives because they can be irrational and persistent. As dying is a somewhat ineffable experience, the unknowability of death, together with its constancy, make it resistant to the notion of progress.[21]

The critique of modernization went hand in hand with a revision of the theory of secularization. From the 1990s, historians challenged the view of modernity as the end of religion, on the grounds that religious experience is more complicated and ambiguous.[22] While acknowledging the decline of organized religion, they rejected Max Weber's idea of disenchantment as it was commonly interpreted to mean the disappearance of spirituality.[23] They argued that the modern world, ever enchanted, remained under the spell of the sacred, and that which is holy migrated from the control of the Church to other spheres, such as politics, art, and leisure.[24] Instead of a teleological progression from the religious to the secular, they opted for a cyclical model of de-sacralization and re-sacralization, which explained the fact that the supernatural world continued to provide a framework for modern ideas about death.[25] This shift is also in line with recent scholarship on Weber that revises traditional readings by approaching his theory of rationalization 'as a dialectics of disenchantment and re-enchantment rather than as a one-sided, unilinear process of secularization'.[26] In this respect, historians also benefited from new approaches to the Reformation and the Enlightenment that highlighted the persistence of belief.[27] In general, the reduction of the role of secularization gave greater weight to other modernizing factors in the history of death, such as democratization, individualism, and mechanized warfare.

Whereas Ariès examined cultural practices in isolation from their political and socio-economic context, recent work combines cultural with political, social, and economic history. In particular, scholars explore the political role of death in relation to community, nationhood, and class. They also adopt a cultural lens to study death as a result of major political events, such as war, revolution, or genocide. New research highlights how funerary rites not only reflect society, but also help to establish tradition, to build communities, and to facilitate the exercise of power. In that sense, the memory of the dead does not simply support culture, but helps to re-make it.

Recent studies tend to foreground individual perceptions of death. This attention to the individual was present in earlier literature, but it was largely limited to 'great men'; in part because of the availability of sources and because modernizing narratives favoured urban elites. As a universal experience, death presents an occasion to shed light on marginal or neglected social groups. Recent scholarship also examines how the formation of personal identities is expressed through

commemoration, although exploring private attitudes to death is by no means an easy task. Unspoken and unwritten, feelings of grief and fears of mortality can escape the historian's gaze. Thus, scholars gravitate towards what they can reach, and extrapolate personal feelings from sources such as monuments, wills, and epigraphs. The flaw in this inductive method is that it presupposes that cultural practices are accurate reflections of personal beliefs, and that emotional reactions are never at odds with social mores or theological dogma. The emergence of more personal forms of belief, with the decline of organized religion, may also have widened the discrepancy between actual human functions and supposed social actions.[28] As grief became interiorized in modern society, it was easy to mistake silence for indifference. Undeterred by evidential difficulties, historians have recently sought to expose personal feelings through a wider range of sources, including those of anthropology and ethnography. This approach rests on the belief that challenges arise from the availability of sources rather than from the inescapable loneliness and incommunicability of dying and bereavement. In addition, new literature uses funerary practices to expose the ties that bind an individual to a community, on the basis that death connects private feelings to public interests, and personal narratives to national histories. Whereas previously the historiography concentrated on France, Britain, and to some extent the rest of Europe and North America, there has been a global expansion of the field with new work that rejects European paradigms. In general, the last decade has brought something of a renaissance in the history of death, with the adoption of fresh interdisciplinary, emotional, and global perspectives.

III

Eight books, published between 2005 and 2015, might be taken to exemplify major innovations in the field and can be divided into two groups on the basis of whether they adopt a *longue durée* approach. In the first category there are works that cover a relatively long time period; for example, Carl Watkins's *The undiscovered country* (2014) examines death in the British Isles from the Middle Ages to the Great War. *In nuce*, Watkins investigates personal perceptions of death in order to challenge a narrative of secularization. He explores 'a past, stretching from the advent of Christianity until perhaps the late Victorian era, in which the people living in the British Isles … shared a vision of their own end'.[29] While Watkins accepts 'a modern narrative of dechristianization', he argues that

supernatural beliefs and the fear of oblivion endured.[30] Death is described as ‘a point of contact between the ancient and modern worlds’ because residues ‘of older visions are still there in the way people speak and structure their thoughts about the dead’.[31] Thus, funerary practices present a strong case to reject the classic account of Weberian disenchantment. Ultimately, Watkins asserts that cosmopolitanism, migration, and a personal approach to religion have had a greater impact than secularization on attitudes to death. He draws on work in early modern history that highlights continuity, and which shows that although ‘the Reformation brought revolution to the realm of the dead’, it did not alter the basic fact that people ‘wanted to be remembered when they were gone, and … wanted to remember the dead’.[32] Like Jay Winter, Watkins affirms that the Great War was not a break with the past.[33] In line with recent historiography that favours a cyclical model of re-enchantment, he describes a process whereby modernity re-cast old views in new guises. As evidenced, for instance, by the rise of spiritualism in place of an untenable belief in ghosts, ‘history does not replicate itself, nor is its course tidy or linear’.[34]

In that Watkins is a historian of the middle ages and religious culture, his eye is drawn to otherworldly beliefs that survive into the modern period. Nonetheless, his book exemplifies current historiographical tendencies to downplay secularization and to highlight continuities between pre-modern and modern history. Watkins gathers personal experiences of death into a collective biography ‘to make [the dead] come back to life briefly in stories made out of their lives’.[35] The fact that he succeeds in bringing empathy to visions of the otherworld proves that systems of thought might change, but underlying emotions remain accessible. Hence, a medieval tomb may be ‘alien to modern sensibilities’, but may still retain its sacred power.[36] That connection with the past makes *The undiscovered country* an enjoyable read and a persuasive case for death as an experience shared by people across time.

Published shortly after Watkins’s book, Thomas Laqueur’s *The work of the dead: a cultural history of mortal remains* (2015) presents a comparable challenge to the idea of secularization. The parallel evolution of these two analogous, but independent, studies is indicative of wider trends in the history of death.[37] In *The work of the dead*, Laqueur explores the culture of death in Western Europe and North America across a *longue durée* that stretches back to antiquity. Within this broad

framework, he focuses on England in the period between 1680 and 2000. Over 700 pages long, *The work of the dead* represents the apogee of a long career dedicated to the cultural history of issues relating to the body, medicine, and sex. It amalgamates the author's previous contributions on death, which addressed modernity, capitalism, and war.[38] Drawing on over a decade of research, Laqueur builds on a succession of anecdotes that, as in Watkins's book, bring individuals back to life. He casts light on relatively unknown figures and shows how changes in the culture of death tended to flow upward as personal feelings prevailed over measures imposed by public authorities.

Essentially, *The work of the dead* is a social and cultural history of what 'real living people' did with dead bodies.[39] It pivots on two main points, namely that death is a foundation of culture and that its cultural role endures throughout history. First, Laqueur notes that it is irrational to care about an inanimate corpse, but this is a sign, or perhaps *the* sign, 'of our emergence from the order of nature into culture'.[40] As the 'ground zero' of civilization, death practices do not simply reflect culture, but create it.[41] Secondly, Laqueur asserts that the dead have not lost their aura in modern life, but rather continue to perform 'cultural work'. While dismissing Gorer's thesis of denial as the product of nostalgia, he sets his work apart from that of Ariès and Vovelle by choosing to speak of enchantment, rather than de-christianization.[42]

At its core, *The work of the dead* is history written in the name of continuity. For Laqueur, what changes is the manner in which the dead are present within culture, not the fact of their presence. Thus, he traces a thread through the evolution of mortuary practices in relation to churchyards, cemeteries, cremation, the First World War, and the Holocaust. Like Watkins, Laqueur draws on recent studies to show how the idea of the sacred survived into the modern era and how the dead were granted renewed powers through the reinvention of enchantment. Again like Watkins, Laqueur notes that the Reformation had little effect on burial, which he ascribes to the fact that commemoration served 'deeper civilizational purposes' than religion.[43] His version of the Enlightenment is not 'the usual story' of disenchantment through secularization (following Ariès) or through medicalization (following Foucault).[44] For Laqueur, the sanctity of the dead did not collapse with the evolution of modern science, rather it was established on new foundations.[45] In fact, with a declining belief in the immortal soul, the fate of the body acquired greater importance.

Laqueur's work has some significant corollaries; for instance, he re-interprets the reformation of funerary practices that, from the late 1700s, put an end to Christian traditions of church burial, and which led to the creation of modern and secular burial grounds. Traditionally, that reformation has been attributed to a combination of Enlightenment concerns for order and hygiene, on one hand, and Romantic ideas of death, on the other. For Laqueur, neither practical nor cultural factors offer sufficient explanation, as the threat of contagion was exaggerated and reform preceded the emergence of Romanticism. Instead, Laqueur explains those reforms in economic, political, and social terms, as a response to a more complex class system, to the commercialization of the burial of the dead, and to efforts to place death under state control. This is a valuable corrective to a cultural approach *à la* Ariès, which neglects political and socio-economic factors. Similarly, Laqueur highlights the modern custom of inscribing the names of the dead on war monuments, which he takes as evidence of the evolution of modern ideas of the self.[46] In Laqueur's view, the right of common soldiers to be recorded marked a triumph for democracy and the beginning of a 'new era of remembrance', which in a previous work he identified with the Great War, but in this book he associates with the late eighteenth century.[47] This change reflects recent historiographical tendencies to view the War as a turning point, rather a beginning, in the process of modernization.

While Laqueur is comfortable with broad statements, his study results in a number of inconsistencies. For instance, the notion that the 'special dead' lost their status in the modern age is at odds with the importance afforded to the bodies of national heroes.[48] It is also significant that Laqueur rejects the findings, but not the overall framework, of French cultural history as presented by the work of Vovelle and Ariès. By choosing to focus on Europe and North America and on a long period of time, Laqueur aligns his methodology with Ariès's *The hour of our death*. In that sense, *The work of the dead* may be the last book in an established tradition, rather than the first in a new genre. However, its wide scope also relates to the work of anthropologists such as Robert Hertz and Claude Levi-Strauss, who identified enduring characteristics in death practices. Innovative in approach, but traditional in scope, Laqueur's book suggests that continuity is a key element in current historiography. As both a compelling read and an impressive piece of scholarship, it is likely to stand out as a classic in the history of death.

Similarly focused on the *longue durée*, there are innovative works that re-invent paradigms, which were developed to study Europe and North America, to suit other geographical areas. Here, death is portrayed as a universal experience that, beyond Europe, diverges from European historical narratives. At the forefront is Claudio Lomnitz's *Death and the idea of Mexico* (2005), a political and cultural history of death from the sixteenth to the twentieth-first centuries. Lomnitz describes how, after an initial boom in the 1970s–80s, historians and anthropologists had largely exhausted the examination of funerary customs as reflections of culture. By the early 2000s, death had 'become somewhat stale again', as if we had 'contemplated ourselves in its mirror long enough'.[49] Originally, Lomnitz had planned to write a history of death in Mexico in line with the work of Ariès, but later realized that this would revisit the same narratives, albeit with minor variations. Instead of writing a sequel to *The Hour of Our Death*, Lomnitz decided to abandon its 'unmistakably European' narrative in favour of a truly Latin American history that explored 'an ironic intimacy with death as a singularly Mexican strategy'.[50] By highlighting the centrality of death in Mexican culture, he refutes the theory of a modern 'denial of death'.[51] Finding the sources of the 'mentalities school' to be inadequate, he overcomes distinctions between popular and elite culture, while covering a variety of media in the form of novels, lithographs, television series, radio programmes, funeral sermons, and comic books.

Whereas the authors of the other books reviewed in this essay are historians, Lomnitz is an anthropologist for whom death practices are socially and politically constructed, and death is a forum where private experience overlaps with the public culture of a nation. He notes that, due to a disproportionate emphasis on the attitudes of mourners and the dying, the early historical literature ignores the fact that death practices both unify a group and exclude outsiders. For Lomnitz, 'the key to a political study of attitudes toward death' lies in the different ways in which a community treats the dead body of a friend or an enemy – a distinction that was heightened in Mexico as a nation of opposing communities.[52] Mexicans adopted death as a national symbol that could both conceal and signal differences between communities.

Spanning six centuries and a variety of sources, *Death and the idea of Mexico* is an erudite and fascinating work. Similar in length and breadth to Laqueur's *The work of the dead,* it shares the 'wonderful, meandering quality' of Ariès's *The hour of our death*.[53] Chiefly, it addresses three topics:

‘the origin and meaning of popular mortuary commemorations’, ‘the connection between this culture of death and national identity formation’, and ‘the nationalization of Mexican intimacy with, or indifference to, death’.[54] According to Lomnitz, ‘death occupies a peculiar, if not a unique, position’ in Mexico as a national symbol that did not emerge from state-sponsored propaganda, but from everyday life. Rather than positing the existence of a popular culture of death appropriated by rulers, Lomnitz looks at how mortuary practices shaped both popular culture and the state.[55] Like Watkins and Laqueur, Lomnitz focuses on historical continuities. He debunks a theory that the national holiday of the Day of the Dead was recently invented by anthropologists, intellectuals, and tourism promotors, by tracing its long history and popular roots. Like Laqueur, Lomnitz acknowledges the influence of market forces and explains the enduring tradition of the Day of the Dead partly in economic terms. He explores the evolving meanings attributed to the skeleton as a national symbol of social equality, the transience of life, and the connections between death and birth. He also shows how, in the revolutionary era, national sovereignty rested on the power to control the remains of the dead. Thus, although some of the parallels between different periods appear forced, Lomnitz uncovers universal mechanisms in the politicization of death.[56] Ultimately, there are two important lessons to be drawn from his book: in focusing on the dying or the bereaved historians may loose sight of the political role of death; and European narratives are an inadequate framework for non-European contexts.

Further developments in the field are likely to fall in another category of studies that adopt a narrower timeframe. For example, Julie-Marie Strange’s *Death, grief, and poverty in Britain, 1870-1914* (2005) stands out as a conscious effort to overcome biases in the earlier literature. Strange argues that Ariès’s characterization of the nineteenth century as the era of mourning led to an undue focus on the ‘Victorian celebration of death’ – ‘a myth of our making’ which she seeks to demolish by shifting the focus from the elites to the poor.[57] *Death, grief, and poverty* is the first book to address working-class rituals as an ‘alternative language of loss’ that ran counter to elite traditions. Thus, as with Lomnitz, Strange looks to a popular culture of death. To some extent, she also draws on David Cannadine’s argument that the simplification of funerary customs after the First World War did not mean that the dead disappeared from the thoughts of the living. However, Strange goes further in that she questions the identification of the Great War as the end of Victorian funerary culture, arguing that

the war had less impact on working-class customs than on the ostentatious rituals of the elite.[58] As it became impossible to follow Victorian burial etiquette for those missing in combat, or buried overseas, the elites turned to interiorized, subdued, and improvised forms of mourning that were already common among the working classes. Thus, rather than introduce a new culture of death, the Great War minimized social differences and extended to the elite a private language of grief that existed among the poor. As with Winter in *Sites of mourning*, Strange places the First World War in a continuum, which allows her to take account of traditions that began before the war and endured after it.[59]

Strange also seeks to improve on earlier studies by relating cultural changes to wider social, economic, and political processes. By using death as a window onto class, she sets funerary rites against a socio-economic backdrop of rising living standards, improved access to medical provision, and shifting views on poverty. She then balances that socio-economic narrative with an awareness of cultural continuities. For example, while she follows Laqueur's view of the secularization of burial as a product of capitalist development, she also guards against a purely materialistic explanation by asserting that funerary rituals are not only about status and consumerism, but also about grief.[60] She also draws on recent innovations in social history and on flexible definitions of class and identity. In a review of Strange's book, Laqueur questioned the existence of a distinct working-class culture of death, opining that grief is not a matter of class.[61] However, Strange makes a strong case that personal experiences of dying and mourning are rooted in a sense of social belonging.

Strange notes the 'startling' omission of grief from early explorations of death in Victorian Britain.[62] Although Pat Jalland tackles the subject in her pioneering *Death in the Victorian family* (1996), she focuses exclusively on elites, reflecting an assumption that 'the working classes were rarely touched by … "pure" grief' because high mortality rates fostered apathy and resignation.[63] In contrast, Strange asserts that: 'my instincts and experiences refuse to permit me to believe that poverty robs people of feeling.'[64] She contests the binary opposition of the respectable burial and the pauper's grave, and fosters a more nuanced understanding of Victorian culture through an investigation of private feelings. This approach builds on developments in emotional history, but also reflects a turn in the literature on death. In order to access the world of private emotions, Strange

considers a wide and diverse range of sources; including municipal documents, novels, medical journals, and autobiographies. *Death, grief, and poverty* is ground-breaking in its application of new approaches to overlooked areas of research. It demonstrates three innovations in recent literature, in that it combines elements of cultural and social history, abandons canonical periodization in favour of historical continuities, and addresses individual experiences and neglected social groups.

Similarly to Lomnitz's book, Drew Gilpin Faust's *This republic of suffering: death and the American Civil War* (2008) addresses the political functions of commemoration. Its subject is the 'work of death', by which Faust means the acts of killing, dying, burying, and mourning as the most 'fundamental and demanding' undertakings of Civil War America.[65] Her main point is that the experience of death at war helped to shape the modern American nation, and that the public and personal mechanisms that were developed to cope with the loss of over a million dead substantially transformed American society, culture, and politics. In overturning a positive interpretation of the Civil War as a victory for liberty, Faust shows how mass slaughter violated assumptions about the 'proper way' to die, and led to a revision of attitudes towards death. In addition, the recognition of private feelings of grief had a marked impact on state policies; as, in 1862, when the Federal government acknowledged its debt to fallen soldiers, by taking responsibility for their burial, and thereby expanding the power of the modern state to encompass the commemoration of the dead. The war transformed relationships between citizens and the state, as federal bureaucracy expanded to provide national cemeteries, records of the dead, and pensions for their families. Thus, 'the nation's value and importance were both derived from and proved by the human price paid for its survival'.[66] As a leading expert in Civil War history, Faust argues that the war 'created the modern American Union', not only by guaranteeing its survival, but also by forging an imagined national community centered on death.[67]

As in Fussell's *The Great War and modern memory*, Faust describes how modern culture arose from a 'crisis of meaning' caused by the bloodbath of war.[68] However, for Faust, that development happened first in Civil War America and later in Europe during the First World War.[69] In line with the work of George Mosse, Faust sees the public role of fallen soldiers not only as a defining sign of modernity, but also as a counterforce to the de-sacralization of death. With respect to secularization,

Faust reveals a complicated situation in which the war gave rise to both religious doubt and a search for spiritual comfort. Like Watkins and Laqueur, she refutes a narrative of disenchantment on the grounds that the sacred power of the dead was transferred from the spheres of the Church and family to the nation and civil society. As war unsettled traditional systems of belief, the state moved in to uphold the sacredness of death. Thus, Faust argues, modern societies continue to care for the inanimate corpse as an 'act of social solidarity' – an idea which had a profound influence on Laqueur's *The work of the dead*.[70]

Like Strange in her work on Victorian Britain, Faust adopts methods that were developed to study the First World War; for instance, she uses personal sources, such as letters of condolence, to access interior lives.[71] Similarly to Watkins, she weaves personal stories, sometimes told in the words of the protagonists, into an evocative patchwork. Taken as a whole, *This republic of suffering* is both innovative and influential in its acknowledgment of the political implications of mourning, the relationship between public and private commemoration, and the inadequacy of a narrative of secularization.

Whereas Claudio Lomnitz adjusted the paradigms of the historiography to reflect a Latin American context, Vincent Brown expanded the field to cover Jamaica in *The reaper's garden: death and power in the world of Atlantic slavery* (2008). This innovative book exemplifies recent attempts to establish that death rites are cultural and political, and both reflective and generative of historical change. In that sense, Brown sees the grim reaper as a 'gardener' as well as a 'harvester', in that death moulds 'the activities of the living, cultivating their understanding of the world and their struggle to shape it'.[72] Following this premise, he uses death to illuminate the political economy of an unsettled slave society. In colonial Jamaica, death was omnipresent and universal, as an exceptionally high mortality affected slave and slave-owners alike. For displaced Europeans and Africans, it provided a tool of social organization and political mobilization, but also a point of contention in struggles between white and non-white populations. *The reaper's garden* exposes general processes in the politics of death that were thrown into sharp relief by the unique conditions of colonial Jamaica, but which could be transposed to comparable countries. Whereas, for Faust, death united two sides in the American Civil War, for Lomnitz, it divided conflicting Mexican communities. Whether unifying or

divisive, however, the dead played a role in structuring the political order. On this point, Brown sides with the cultural anthropologist Katherine Verdery who showed how, after the fall of Communism, the dead served to establish a new political basis in former Soviet countries.[73] Verdery argues that at times of crisis and transformation the dead can be used as political symbols to re-organize society – a concept of 'dead body politics' that has left a mark on recent literature.[74]

Brown is primarily interested in the political role of cultural practices and tackles this issue by means of four questions: how did people formulate their relations with the dead? How were those relations embedded in political conflict? How did mortuary practice evolve in response to demographic, socioeconomic, political, and religious changes? And how did it shape the politcs of contending groups? A key point in *The reaper's garden* is that a common narrative of modernization makes little sense in the Jamaican context, as it fails to account for the role of the supernatural in popular politics. The 'world of Jamaican slavery, where the dead were active players … was still an enchanted one'.[75] This portrayal of the dead as 'participants in the living world' had a marked influence on Laqueur's *The work of dead*.[76] Brown, like Laqueur, Faust, and Watkins, rejects the notion of disenchantment in favour of a migration of the sacred to other spheres. *The reaper's garden* also has parallels with Lomnitz's *Death and the idea of Mexico* in that both books discredit a modern narrative of 'disappearance' by highlighting the prominence of death in colonial societies with high levels of spirituality, mortality, and conflict.

Faced with the double challenge of rationalizing the irrational while accessing the lives of an oppressed and illiterate population, Brown draws on diverse sources, such as 'tombstone inscriptions, wills, diaries, parish vestry minutes, plantation account papers, court returns, travellers' reports, assembly minutes, visual images, and the archaeology of burial sites'.[77] Like Strange and Faust, he correlates multiple sources to uncover private emotions. Recognizing the difficulty of accessing the interior life, he also frequently abandons 'the omniscient narrator's voice favoured by historians' for a 'sincere engagement with sources'.[78] The result is a gripping and, at times, moving portrayal of life and death in colonial Jamaica, which uncovers new directions of inquiry.

On a civic rather than a national scale, Monica Black's *Death in Berlin* (2010) addresses the relationship between a city and its dead, by examining 'rituals, practices, and perceptions surrounding

death' from the establishment of the Weimar Republic in 1919 to Germany's division in 1961.[79] Essentially, 'the purpose of this book is to demonstrate how … death can illuminate the continual process of cultural change in Berlin over successive waves of historical transformation'.[80] Thus, death constitutes a constant in a period of rapid developments and a fixed point from which to view history in motion. The book is innovative on three counts. First, it does not dismiss a modernizing narrative, but adjusts that narrative to account for exceptional events involving mass death. The aim is 'to bridge the distance scholars like Ariès and Gorer maintained when discussing attitudes toward death with the very real and devastating experiences of death in twentieth-century Europe'.[81] Secondly, the book correlates literature addressing individual loss and mass death, and combines the everyday with major historical events. Thirdly, Black argues that death practices are used to define and transform collective identities. As demonstrated by Brown with respect to Jamaica, communities in crisis re-invent themselves, in part, through a shared memory of the dead.

Black approaches the subject of death from an ethnographic perspective and through research that is rooted in the history of everyday life. Like Strange, she acknowledges that 'practices and beliefs around death, which lie about as close as it gets to the nitty-gritty of everyday life, only rarely find their way into written sources'.[82] She shows how individuals were forced to adapt attitudes to death in response to war and major political events, but also clung to heartfelt, and diverse, beliefs. For example, the survival of traditions that were at odds with dominant ideologies is evidenced by the fact that the rulers of the Nazi regime and the GDR were never fully able to control how people felt about death. That notion of individual resistance is an important addition to the study of mass death, and stems from recent approaches that look to personal loss instead of political manipulation.

For Black, the impact of the First World War should be measured in terms of human reactions rather than in relation to modernity. As civilian burials imitated the simplicity and uniformity of war graves, 'not only the cemetery … but death itself needed its dignity restored in the wake of the mass bloodletting'.[83] Like Winter and Faust, Black eschews a narrative of secularisation by showing how the First World War brought spiritual revival. She describes how the commemoration of the war dead erupted in Weimar Germany as 'more than a political issue', but an incapacity to agree on the meaning of the war made it impossible to devolve a common strategy of remembrance.[84] She argues

that during the Nazi regime ‘death, its practices, and material culture appeared to some to be a key site for rearticulating Germaness’.[85] The Nazis sought to introduce cultural and political change by imposing stoic and fearless attitudes to death, and burial in simple and uniform graves. By showing how the regime used funerary practices to re-draw the cultural boundaries of the nation, Black follows Lomnitz’s perception of death as a way for social groups to distinguish between who is considered inside and outside the community. Pointedly, she describes how the National Socialist regime used mass burial to exclude Jews from the German ‘race’. At the same time, she corrects a tendency to concentrate on ideology that might exclude some of ‘the myriad *social* meanings attached to death in the Third Reich’.[86] Rather than treating mass death under Nazi rule as an exceptional event, Black integrates it into a longer history of Berlin, and highlights continuities that were underpinned by local traditions, social networks, and familial relationships. During the Second World War, the Nazi party kept the commemoration of the war dead under tight control, but had ‘to maintain a careful balance between a tacit acknowledgement of the population’s sadness and its own desire to emphasize Nazi perspectives on death’.[87] Black concludes that Berliners never fully adopted the official Nazi policy with respect to the dead – as evidenced by the fact that only one percent of burials were carried out according to Nazi rites. In the final phase of the war, Berliners went to extraordinary lengths to observe funerary traditions, which were seen as essential to maintaining social cohesion, cultural values, and historical continuity.

After 1945, the burial of the dead was key to ‘the establishment of a new moral order in Berlin’.[88] While some Nazi influences endured, death practices were used to take a ‘mental step away from Nazism’ and to set aside difficult memories of the war.[89] In both East and West Berlin, the commemoration of German soldiers constituted a fraught issue. The authorities of the GDR were cautious in their efforts to politicize death as they ‘feared treading too roughly on the sensitivities of a population still reeling from its losses’.[90] In western Berlin, war graves were re-organized in an effort to help a society destabilized by death to regain equilibrium. Thus, through death, Berliners defined ‘who they were as a group’ and how they remembered the past.[91] In that sense, in her powerful and fascinating book, Black demonstrates a high degree of continuity in death practices over a period of dramatic change.

VI

In conclusion, it may be argued that the cultural history of death had its roots in the 1970s and in questions, subjects, and narratives that were established by a core group of French and Anglophone historians. Ariès's *The hour of our death* was an influential model, but its reception was mixed. In fact, later scholars sought to disprove the book's linear narrative of modernization, which relied on a theory of secularization and Gorer's idea of a modern 'denial of death'. Whereas Ariès focused on dying in peacetime, a group of largely Anglophone historians highlighted the impact of the First World War on perceptions and practices of death. Within this group, there were efforts to integrate the histories of death in times of war and peace, and to reconcile the public prominence afforded to fallen soldiers with the partial disappearance of death from public view. Whereas French models were influential in terms of general approach, the Anglophone literature had a greater impact on the content of current scholarship.

A selection of studies that were published between 2005 and 2015 provides evidence of a revival in the history of death, which incorporates four main areas of innovation. First, recent literature jettisons the narrative of disappearance in favour of an emphasis on continuity, and highlights the fact that modernity did not mean disenchantment. This also relates to the difficulties of reconciling modernization with the history of mass death. Secondly, recent literature embodies an effort to study death as an integral part of political, social, and economic structures, and to explore the role of funerary rituals in shaping nations and communities. This posits the existence of a two-way relationship between death and life, whereby funerary rituals are both 'sign' and 'function' in that they reflect and shape the activities of the living. Thirdly, recent literature widens the social spectrum beyond a concern with elites, and looks at the interior lives of ordinary people. To do so, it draws on a relatively broad and varied range of sources, and on both highbrow and popular culture. Fourthly, whereas in the 1970s, the Anglophone history of death could be described as a characteristically European concern, this is no longer the case as a wider geographical arena has engendered histories that counter Eurocentric narratives.

At first glance, the historiography of death appears to have followed a pattern common to other fields. It has turned away from grand narratives, embraced individuation, and adopted

interdisciplinary and global perspectives. However, the literature also addresses concerns that are specific to the nature of death as a universal experience. Death is also an ideal subject with which to demolish a narrative of progress and modernization driven by urban elites; largely, because attitudes and rituals are relatively irrational, common to all social classes, and resistant to change. It is only by asking new questions that historians have arrived at new answers and upset established paradigms. In that respect, the history of death is alive and well, albeit that it is as messy, confusing, and complex as the history of life.

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[1] Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie, *Le territoire de l'historien* (Paris, 1973), I, pp. 393-403; John McManners, 'Death and the French Historians', in Joachim Whaley, ed., *Mirrors of mortality*: *studies in the social history of death* (London, 1981); Diego Carnevale, 'Dalla morte pensata alla morte vissuta. La storiografia sulla morte dall'"età dei classici" all'"esplosione" odierna', *ilPalindromo*, 9 (2013), pp. 75-91, at p. 77;

[2] Michel Vovelle, *Piété baroque et déchristianisation en Provence au XVIIIe siècle. Les attitudes devant la mort d'après les clauses de testaments* (Paris, 1973); *Mourir autrefois: attitudes collectives devant la mort aux XVIIe et XVIIIe siècles* (Paris, 1974); *La mort et l'Occident de 1300 à nos jours* (Paris, 1983).

[3] Philippe Ariès, *Western attitudes toward death from the Middle Ages to the present* (Baltimore, 1974); *L'homme devant la mort* (Paris: Seuill, 1977); English translation: *The hour of our death* (New York, 1981). See also: Philippe Ariès and David E. Stannard, *Death in America* (Philadelphia, 1976); Philippe Ariès, *Images de l'homme devant la mort* (Paris, 1983); English translation: *Images of man and death* (Cambridge, Mass., 1985).

[4] Allan Mitchell, 'Philippe Ariès and the French way of death', *French Historical Studies* 10 (1978), pp. 684-95.

[5] Michel Foucault, *The birth of the clinic* (London, 1976), pp. 124–48; Ariès, *The hour*, p. 632.

[6] Patrick H. Hutton, 'Of death and destiny: the Ariès–Vovelle debate about the history of mourning', in Peter Homans, ed., *Symbolic loss: the ambiguity of mourning and memory at century's end* (Charlottesville, 2000), pp. 147-70; Idem, *Philippe Ariès and the politics of French cultural history* (Amrest, 2004), pp. 113-28.

[7] John McManners, *Death and the Enlightenment: changing attitudes to death among Christians and unbelievers in eighteenth-century France* (Oxford, 1981), pp. 1–3; Régis Bertrand, 'L'histoire de la mort, de l'histoire des mentalités à l'histoire religieuse', *Revue d'histoire de l'Église de France* 86 (2000), pp. 551-60, at

p. 554.

[8] Patricia Jalland, *Death in the Victorian family* (Oxford, 1996), 7–8; Julie-Marie Strange, *Death, grief and poverty in Britain, 1870-1914* (Cambridge, 2005), p. 18.

[9] Bertrand, 'L'histoire', p. 559. See for example: McManners, *Death*, p. 2; Richard A. Etlin, *The architecture of death: the transformation of the cemetery in eighteenth-century* (Cambridge, Mass, 1984).

[10] Jalland, *Death*; John Wolffe, *Great deaths: grieving, religion, and nationhood in Victorian and Edwardian Britain* (Oxford, 2000); see also Strange, *Death*, pp. 18-19.

[11] Joachim Whaley, ed., 'Introduction', *Mirrors*, pp. 8-9; Jonathan Dollimore, *Death, desire and loss in Western culture* (London, 1998), p. 121.

[12] The Great War is briefly mentioned in Vovelle's *La mort* (pp. 72-30) and Ariès's *L'homme* (p. 577), but there is no entry for 'war' in the index of Ariès's book.

[13] David Cannadine, 'War and death, grief and mourning in modern Britain', in Whaley, ed., *Mirrors*, at pp. 187-242, 188-9, 217, 230; Cannadine's influence is evidenced by the fact that this quote appears in at least eight major historical studies that were published between 1999 and 2016.

[14] Cannadine, 'War', pp. 194, 218; Sigmund Freud, 'Thoughts for the times on war and death', in *The standard edition of the complete psychological works of Freud (1914-1916)* (London, 1957), p. 291.

[15] Luc Capdevila and Daniele Voldman, eds., *War dead: Western societies and the casualties of war* (Edinburgh, 2006), pp. xi-xvii and 180-1.

[16] J. M. Winter, *Sites of memory, sites of mourning: The Great War in European cultural history* (Cambridge, 1995), pp. 1, 10, 115.

[17] Fussell, *The Great War*, pp. 38, 338-40; Winter, *Sites*, pp. 5 and 8; also: Leonard V. Smith, 'Paul Fussell's The Great War and modern memory: Twenty-Five Years Later', *History and Theory* 40 (2001): pp. 241-60, at p. 244; Kate McLoughlin, 'The Great War and modern memory', *Essays in Criticism* 64 (1 October 2014), pp. 436–58.

[18] See for example: Capdevila and Voldman, eds., *War dead* , xi–xvii and 180–1; Christian Goeschel, *Suicide in Nazi Germany* (Oxford, 2009), pp. 4-10; Paul Betts, Alon Confino, and Dirk Schumann, eds., *Between mass death and individual loss: the place of the dead in twentieth-century Germany* (Oxford, 2011), p. 5.

[19] Cannadine, 'War', p. 227.

[20] George L. Mosse, 'National cemeteries and national revival: the cult of fallen soldiers in Germany', *Journal of Contemporary History* 14 (1 January 1979), pp. 1–20; Idem, *Fallen soldiers: reshaping the memory of the*

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[21] Vincent Brown, *The reaper's garden: death and power in the world of Atlantic slavery* (Cambridge, Mass., 2008), p. 5; Dollimore, *Death*, pp. ix-xxxii; Drew Gilpin Faust, *This republic of suffering: death and the American Civil War* (New York, 2009), p. 30

[22] Jeremy Morris, 'The strange death of Christian Britain: another look at the secularization debate', *The Historical Journal*, 46 (2003), pp. 963-76; David Martin, *On secularization: towards a revised general theory* (Farnham, 2005); Jeremy Morris, 'Secularization and religious experience: arguments in the historiography of modern British religion', *The Historical Journal*, 55 (March 2012), pp. 195-219.

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[25] Martin, *On secularization*, 130; Walsham, 'The Reformation'.

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[27] For instance, see: Bruce Gordon and Peter Marshall, eds., *The place of the dead: death and remembrance in late medieval and early modern Europe* (Cambridge, 2000).

[28] Tony Walter, *The revival of death* (London, 1994), p. 23; Walsham, 'The Reformation', p. 521.

[29] Carl Watkins, *The undiscovered country: journeys among the dead* (London, 2014), p. xvi.

[30] Ibid.

[31] Ibid., pp. 13 and xvii.

[32] Ibid., pp. 75 and 143.

[33] Winter, *Sites*.

[34] Watkins, *The undiscovered country*, p. 258.

[35] Ibid., p. 143.

[36] Ibid., p. 12.

[37] Ibid., p. 577 and personal communication with Carl Watkins on 18 January 2017.

[38] For instance: Thomas W. Laqueur, 'Cemeteries, religion and the culture of capitalism', in Jane Garnett and Colin Matthew, eds., *Revival and religion since 1700* (London, 1993), pp. 183-200; Idem., 'Memory and naming in the Great War', in John Gillis, ed., *Memory and commemoration* (Princeton, 1993), pp. 150-67; Idem., 'Places of the dead in modernity', in Colin Jones and Dror Wahrman, eds., *The age of cultural revolutions: Britain and France, 1750-1820* (Berkeley, 2002); Idem., 'The deep time of the dead', *Social Research*, 78 (2011), pp. 799-820.

[39] Thomas W. Laqueur, *The work of the dead: a cultural history of mortal remains* (Princeton, 2015), p. 17.

[40] Ibid., p. 8. See also: Laqueur, 'The deep time', p. 801.

[41] Laqueur, *The work of the dead*, p. 31.

[42] Ibid., p. 604 and personal communication with Thomas Laqueur on 16 February 2016.

[43] Ibid., p. 101.

[44] Ibid., p. 184; for a comparison, see McManners, *Death*.

[45] See also: Faust, *This republic*, pp. 61-2.

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[47] Laqueur, *The work of the dead*, p. 448; 'Memory', p. 152.

[48] Ibid., p. 54.

[49] Claudio Lomnitz, *Death and the idea of Mexico* (Brooklyn, 2008), p. 13.

[50] Ibid., pp. 13, 20.

[51] Ibid., pp. 264-8.

[52] Ibid., pp. 15-17.

[53] Ibid., 13.

[54] Ibid., p. 57.

[55] Ibid., pp. 58-9.

[56] See for instance: ibid., pp. 36, 63.

[57] Strange, *Death*, p. 20.

[58] Ibid., pp. 264-73.

[59] Ibid., pp. 268-9.

[60] Laqueur, 'Cemeteries', p. 185.

[61] Thomas W. Laqueur, 'Review of Death, grief, and poverty in Britain, 1870-1914', *The Journal of Modern History* 80 (2008), pp. 650-52.

[62] Strange, *Death*, p. 11.

[63] Ibid.

[64] Ibid., p. 25.

[65] Faust, *This republic*, p. 2.

[66] Ibid., p. 268.

[67] Ibid., p. xviii.

[68] Fussell, *The Great War*, pp. 150–1; Faust, *This republic*, p. 267.

[69] Ibid., p. 194.

[70] Thomas W. Laqueur, 'Among the graves', *London Review of Books* 30 (2008), pp. 3–9; *The work of the dead*, p. 653.

[71] Ibid., p. 30; Strange, *Death*, p. 213.

[72] Brown, *The reaper's garden*, p. 256.

[73] Katherine Verdery, *The political lives of dead bodies: reburial and postsocialist change* (New York, 1999).

[74] Verdery, *The political lives*, pp. 28–30, 108–110; for instance: Laqueur, *The work of the dead*, p. 564; Monica Black, *Death in Berlin: from Weimar to divided Germany* (Cambridge, 2010), p. 97.

[75] Brown, *The reaper's garden*, p. 258.

[76] Ibid., p. 4; Laqueur, *The work of the dead*, p. 561.

[77] Brown, *The reaper's garden*, p. 10.

[78] Ibid.

[79] Black, *Death in Berlin*, p. 1.

[80] Ibid., p. 177.

[81] Ibid., p. 7.

[82] Ibid., p. 87.

[83] Ibid., p. 40.

[84] Ibid., p. 62.

[85] Ibid., p. 79.

[86] Ibid., p. 126.

[87] Ibid., p. 104.

[88] Ibid., p. 151.

[89] Ibid., p. 153.

[90] Ibid., p. 189.

[91] Ibid., p. 106.