

CHAPTER 1

The anthropology of violent death and the treatment of the bodies: an introduction

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Anthropological approaches to death abound in the classical literature (Bloch and Parry 1982; Dreyfus and Anstett 2017; Ferguson 2006; Hertz 1960; Laqueur 2002, 2015; Martin et al. 2012; Metcalf and Huntington 1991; Carr 1995; Parker Pearson 2016; Robben 2018a, 2018b; Ucko 1969; Van Gennep 1960; Verdery 1999; Whitehead 2002, 2004a, 2005, 2007; among others). On the one hand, the anthropology of death has focused on elucidating how the dead continue to live in the collective imagination through a wide variety of mortuary and funerary rites. These rituals reinforce the meaning of death as an alternative way of living, prolonging their bonds, facing loss, and turning that death into a “good death.” On the other hand, the representation of the body carries a symbolic load of meanings, such as the “brute stuff of death itself”,¹ and it sets up a wide range of traditions and customs for an appropriate commemoration. Hertz (1960) contributions have constituted the starting point to address both issues, and they have strongly driven the advancement of knowledge in the field of the anthropology of death. According to Engelke (2019, p. 31), “what we can take from Hertz is that the anthropology of death always begins and ends with the stuff of death, above all the materiality of the corpse, but more generally speaking the things that matter to making death good.” Additionally, Hertz’s

approach does not focus only on how people remember their dead but also on how the dead prompt the living to remember them (Robben 2018a). These memories can be good to think about, but they can also be damaging, disturbing, and intrusive, and they can even be politically used to dominate or destroy others (Anstett and Dreyfus 2014; Dreyfus and Anstett 2017; Stepputat 2014; Verdery 1999).

Throughout its history, humanity has been closely – and somewhat ironically – linked to violent episodes that have resulted in the death of millions of people (Fry 2013). In the twentieth century alone, between 170 and 230 million people have died violently as a result of human actions (Hobsbawm 1994; Leitenberg 2006; Robinson 1998; Rummel 1996). Between 1990 and 2017, lethal violence in the form of criminal activity in particular and armed conflicts in general have produced nearly 14 million victims as well as countless social, humanitarian, economic, and cultural consequences. Paradoxically, all this has happened during an era distinguished by the positioning of science and technology, as well as the solid defense of human rights, but at the same time, it is clear that profound issues of disrespect for life, death, and human dignity still persist. This reality does not concur with those arguments stating that we have become less violent as we have become more civilized, as proposed, for example, by Pinker (2011). Rather, as Whitehead (2004c) and Sorel (1999) have highlighted, there is no straightforward correlation between violence and progress; violence always takes different forms and emerges in diverse contexts, and anthropologists have been exploring these expressions for quite a long time (Domínguez 2018).²

Pinker's arguments gathered support from popular sources, such as the recommendations made by Bill Gates and Mark Zuckerberg in 2018,³ but they also sparked opposing reactions, including the criticisms expressed in John Gray's (2011) *Delusions of Peace*⁴ and later (2015) in "Steven Pinker is wrong about violence and war".⁵ In both pieces, Gray offers a series of solid reasons to doubt that violence is declining. Ferguson (2013) also contradicted Pinker's thesis, arguing that what Pinker points out might be actually true but in the complete opposite direction. Other critiques point out Pinker's inappropriate use of statistical information to build his case (Cirillo and Taleb 2016; Falk and Hildebolt 2017) as well as the limitations and exaggerations in his use of data regarding violence in the prehistoric past (Ferguson 2013; Martin and Harrod 2015; Martin and Tegtmeier 2017; Martin et al. 2012).

Historical documentation has played an important role in establishing and understanding the magnitude of violent episodes as part of armed conflicts (Hobsbawm 1994, 2002, 2008; Keegan 1976, 2012; Leitenberg 2006), and archaeology has contributed to the interpretive analysis of these events of prehistoric violence through the collection of data from the various bodies and contexts observed (Arkush and Allen 2008; Anderson and Martin 2018; Arkush and

Allen 2006; Ferguson 2008; Martin and Anderson 2014; Ralph 2013; Redfern 2017; Nielsen and Walker 2009; Smith and Knusel 2014). Likewise, forensic anthropology⁶ has dealt with the analysis of violent events in recent history (Baraybar 2015; Doretti and Fondebrider 2001; Ferllini 2003, 2007; Fondebrider 2002, 2016; Kimmerle and Baraybar 2008; Komar and Lathrop 2012; Márquez-Grant and Errickson 2021; Rosenblatt 2010; Schmitt 2002; Snow 1984; Snow et al. 1989; Ubelaker 1996, 2017; Ubelaker et al. 2019; among others). Other anthropological approaches have also formulated explanations regarding the meaning of violence dynamics (Domínguez 2018; Ferguson 1984; Ferguson and Whitehead 1999; Fry 2013; Riches 1986, 1991; Schmidt and Schroder 2001; Whitehead 2004a, 2005, 2007; among others). However, the dissemination of anthropological knowledge regarding death and endemic violence is still a pending challenge and highly relevant in order to inform the opinion of the non-specialized public community (Buikstra 2019).

Evidence shows that the causes and processes behind violent deaths extend far beyond warfare; currently, intentional homicide due to criminal activities, interpersonal relationships, and a myriad of sociopolitical and cultural factors are the leading causes of death worldwide (UNODC 2019).⁷ Violent death, played out in all these different scenarios, has catapulted societies across the world into a humanitarian crisis, with tens of thousands of clandestine dump sites.⁸ In most situations, these places present a devastating image that is difficult to grasp due to the harshness of its cruelty and misery. Humans are experiencing a period of history that has accelerated to a “dizzying pace” and advancing at a speed that endangers our species (Hobsbawm 2008). All evidence indicates that political, ideological, racial, and religious motivations have been exacerbating our own destruction (Anstett and Dreyfus 2014). According to Parra and colleagues (2020, p. 79), “all these bloody episodes require new thoughts for humanitarian action to be conducted in an appropriate way. In many ways, social sciences and forensic sciences need to unite to face such humanitarian challenges”. Within this context, the anthropology of violent death aims to become a framework for understanding what we should avoid as humanity and what we should embrace in terms of humanitarian action looking forward. During the first decades of the last century, Boas (1928, p. 11) argued “that a clear understanding of the principles of anthropology illuminates the social processes of our own times and may show us, if we are ready to listen to its teachings, what to do and what to avoid”. Certainly, anthropology must keep contributing to this task by drawing attention to and explaining various events that have involved violent deaths, as well as their multiple forms of expression, the reasons behind them, and the meanings that these deaths hold within the affected communities (Anstett and Dreyfus 2014; Ferrándiz and Robben 2015; Fontein 2014; Kwon 2006, 2008; Robben 2018a, 2018b; Rojas-Pérez 2017; Uribe 1990).

Cruel or extreme violence has been a predominant behavior in many different times and contexts, and it has caused a strong impact on the living, the dead, and their symbolic environment (Sémelin 2007; Sofsky 2006; Whitehead 2002, 2004a, 2005, 2007). Apparently, when people exert extreme violence, the biological death of their victims is not the end of their aggression, much less the types of behaviors expressing surrender and submission that in other species – even including chimpanzees, which have shown a high rate of intragroup lethal aggression (Wilson et al. 2014) – would stop the attack (Baumeister 1997; Smith 2020). Rather, among humans, it seems that the behaviors signaling submission and defeat become a strong force that empowers and drives the aggressor to initiate the destruction of his victim (Baumeister 1997; Sémelin 2007; Sofsky 2006; Whitehead 2004b). Why humans have the urge to destroy one another? Why is death not enough? Why should the body of the deceased also be attacked? There is certainly no single or simple answer to these questions.

Whitehead (2007) argues that violence should be understood as an important information exchange system modulated by cultural content, where there is a “recognition that violence is as much a part of meaningful and constructive human living as it is an imagination of the absence and destruction of all cultural and social order” (Whitehead 2007, p. 41). Cruelty – or extreme humiliation – continues to be the mechanism that contributes to the information exchange between the actors involved (victim and perpetrators, including witnesses), and its specific expressions depend on the characteristics of the local culture (Whitehead 2004a, 2004b, 2004c). Baumeister (1997) argued that the origin of these violent actions and limitless violent impulses could be explored within our own behavioral roots and the way we relate to each other. According to Baumeister, among the main triggers of these impulses and actions are, first, the yearn for material security, which includes access to money and the way to obtain it, in addition to the desire for power, in different social and cultural spheres. Second, if egotism is threatened, then resentment is activated and violence begins, and it can escalate to a higher level of aggressiveness when the “favorable image of the person is questioned or contested by someone else” (Baumeister 1997), through humiliation, lack of respect, or a direct attack upon one’s honor and dignity. The response to these aggressions can turn into revenge, with extreme and limitless consequences depending on the injuries caused. Third is idealism: when people firmly believe that they are on the right side and are working to make this world a better place, they see the use of extreme force as justified to ensure that those interests are cared for. Fourth is the pursuit of sadistic pleasure, which encompasses the pathological pleasure derived from killing and seeing their victims suffer, something closely linked to pleasure, arousal, and sexual desire. Various documented examples, such as several forms of mutilation – both of living people and of corpses – as well as other expressions less common in

modern times – such as cannibalism, framed as a sign of power – show us that the diverse combinations of factors that originate violence, such as cultural differences, damaged social relationships, and the intensity of the exchange of information have contributed to create a message that leads to extreme and violent deaths.

Some scholars argue that cruel actions are caused by a dehumanizing process, by which the minimization of the victims' existence gradually escalates in intensity until the victims reach non-human levels, making them comparable to cockroaches, rats, or chickens and therefore justifying – in the perpetrator's mind – their extermination (Smith 2020; Taylor 2004; Uribe 2018). All these specific forms of violence are not produced by a feverish excess of savage, dehumanized, or pathological minds but are rather cultural representations of meaning derived from the history and the sociocultural relationships endemic to a particular place, just as these signs are used performatively through time (Hinton 2002, 2005; Taylor 1999; Whitehead 2004b). Whitehead (2004b) has highlighted that violence is always a matter of intensity, degree, and cultural notions that drive the development of actions from vehement to violent. This approach:

“Is therefore intended to call attention to the way in which the meaning of a violent death cannot be entirely understood by reference to biological origins, sociological functions, or material and ecological necessities but has to be appreciated for the way in which it is also a cultural expression of the most fundamental and complex kind. Such cultural expression itself, if it is to be understood, must necessarily involve competence in the manipulation of signs and symbols” (Whitehead 2004b, p. 68).

The manipulation of signs and symbols referred to by Whitehead has led to an enormous capacity for the production of bodies and inert body parts, which are the result of a growing variety of sophisticated ways to destroy human lives (Anderson and Martin 2018; Anstett 2018; Dreyfus and Anstett 2017; Parra et al. 2020; Sofsky 2006; Uribe 1990) as well as the very essence of their human condition (Kristeva 1982; Sémelin 2007; Sofsky 2006). Anthropology has not only made substantial progress in understanding how the destruction of bodies has been integrated into the social and symbolic space of societies affected by violence but has also devoted abundant attention to contextualize the meaning and role of corpses, their parts, and their bodily fluids in those spaces of violence (Anstett and Dreyfus 2014). The body has been used as a mechanism for the transmission of cruelty that has a significant power to annihilate social structures and the social order (Uribe 1990); while the body can be an object of worship, loaded with symbolic charge and rituality, and could contribute to the construction of complex cultural processes, it can also be a powerful weapon of destruction (Sémelin 2007; Uribe 1990); the cruelty of these actions has extermination – understood as a way

of kill, kill again, and over-kill⁹ – as its main and final purpose. Aware of the profound significance that the manipulation of the victims' bodies carries, the perpetrators get encouraged by these cruel actions and facilitate their exposure according to their own interests, including the creation of sophisticated forms of representation. The body then becomes a means for the transmission and representation of messages that include, but are not limited to, spectacle, humiliation, power, terror, domination, and misery.

Cruelty is the common component underlying such violent expressions that do not cease until the destruction of all physical traces of their victim is complete – that is, until annihilation is achieved. Violent death threatens and damages the social order of the living and the dead, including violence against the “brute stuff of death itself”, and rearranges our worldview to transform these events into a bad death; in this new and negative context, the body and its own identity can be devalued or destroyed to the extreme point of social death (Engelke 2019; Parra et al. 2020), and therefore, it becomes an impure and dangerous entity that pollutes space (Kwon 2006, 2008; Korman 2014; Rojas-Pérez 2017).

Social death goes beyond the biological realm, creating a situation where the social and cultural memory of the individual is consciously vanishing, where the dead lose their identity and their constructive social connection with the living, and where all traces of the existence of the individual are finally destroyed. Social death deals with the loss of all bonds of affection and commemoration, status, and moral positions, and taken to the extreme, it refers to the non-recognition of the human condition (Králová and Walter 2017; Parra et al. 2020). Social death embodies entirely the opposite of what is defended by the principles of the anthropology of death, which, as we have already highlighted, imply the persistence and positive continuity of the social life of the deceased, “in one form or another, to the peace of human association” (Hertz 1960, p. 78), making death a good death and preserving the bonds between individuals and communities (Engelke 2019).

Douglas (1966), Turner (1969), and Kristeva (1982) agree on the need to resolve liminal perceptions of the body when death comes. Kristeva (1982) refers to this condition of the body as an “abject state”, Turner (1969) calls it “unclassified matter”, and Douglas (1966) relates this matter to something “dirty” and culturally “out of place”. In her pioneering work “Purity and Danger: An Analysis of the Concept of Pollution and Taboo”, Douglas introduced the concept of “matter out of place” to highlight everything that does not fit into a specific cultural category. Douglas argues that each culture perceives the world through a system of categories and that these categories define the natural order of their worldview. In a world in which everything has an assigned place, the notion of purity is reduced to a state where things are in their proper place

within the scheme. However, things that do not fit in that order represent a system anomaly or a “matter out of place”, and as such, they are considered dirty, impure, and threatening. This is precisely what happens with a bad death and the deathscapes: when there is no mortuary ritual, the corpse and its body parts become abject (Kristeva 1982).

When the dead are not attended adequately, they do not resolve their liminal status; those who are socially dead become social specters that are culturally encoded and classified. All of them reflect negative qualities due to their seedy condition, so they are considered repulsive and dirty as well as powerful, threatening, and highly dangerous; they are bad phenomena to think about. The persistence of the bad death sets up negative deathscapes or impure places where these powerful specters haunt; these spaces remain in liminality with a strong polluting load if they are not addressed and culturally resolved. Impure and contaminated deathscapes cause the dead to threaten the social order of communities in various regions of the world. The ways in which corpses are disposed, hidden, manipulated, discussed, and exhibited are proportional to the perception of how deaths are understood and internalized by communities (Anstett and Dreyfus 2014; Martin et al. 2012). In addition to the tragedy that violent death represents, the social order is altered as well. In this regard, Crossland and Joyce (2015, p. 17) have highlighted the following:

“A means to transfer the dead body from its liminal location in a temporary grave to a final resting place, where the dead can be reincorporated into society. If the work is successful, the human remains uncovered in forensic excavations will ultimately be reunited with their relatives and undergo the proper funerary rites, once again located in their proper place”.

Forensic science has been contributing both to justice and to social order not only by restoring the ties of connection between the deceased and their loved ones but also by liberating communities from deathscapes tainted with seedy death. In this sense, after a forensic intervention, communities may have the opportunity to reincorporate the dead into social life within their own social realm. The processes of recovery of corpses and human body parts require symbolic sensitivity when confronted to numerous factors: turbulent political contexts, diverse interests in dispute that must be evaluated, and varied cultural rituals of death, among others. It also requires a careful analysis of the ways in which bodies and body parts are manipulated, considering a broad regional approach to the cultural context, and the question of how the manipulation of the corpse would affect local perception and stories in the process of memory creation and commemoration (Martin et al. 2012; Verdery 1999). In this regard, Moon (2012) has argued that human remains transform into what Star and Griesemer (1989) have called “boundary objects”, that is, “an object that lives in

multiple social worlds and which has different identities in each" (Star and Griesemer (1989, p. 409). Moon (2012) considers that boundary objects remain, although they are linked to different interests, and they can be used and interpreted differently; they can offer the opportunity to establish points of mediation and negotiation because they are very flexible to adapt to local needs and different identities, but they are also extremely solid to sustain a common identity in all those convergent spaces. As stated by Parra et al. (2020) forensic sciences need to generate new models and strategies in humanitarian action and human rights, where the needs of the various parties in litigation can be met throughout the rescue of the boundary objects.

Notes

1. As stated by Engelke (2019, p. 30).
2. <https://anthrosource.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/hub/journal/15481433/violence>
3. <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2018/jan/12/davos-bill-gates-mark-zuckerberg-what-to-read>
4. <https://www.prospectmagazine.co.uk/magazine/john-gray-steven-pinker-violence-review>
5. <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2015/mar/13/john-gray-steven-pinker-wrong-violence-war-declining>
6. Forensic anthropology as a discipline takes multiple dimensions from anthropology, which has a recognized history of development and which is nurtured by a diversity of conceptual perspectives, theoretical foundations, and methods (Boyd Jr and Boyd 2018; Christensen et al. 2014; Dirkmaat et al. 2008; Dirkmaat 2012; Komar and Buikstra 2008; Steadman 2013; Ubelaker 1996, 2017, among others). This discipline has played a fundamental role for the study of skeletal biology in forensic contexts, which has contributed to the documentation of the deceased's profile, including variables such as sex, age, phenotypic characteristics, health, and disease conditions as well as the circumstances of death through the study of traumatic injury to bone (Wedel and Galloway 2014; Komar and Buikstra 2008; Symes et al. 2012; Kimmerle and Baraybar 2008, among others). The archaeological approach to forensic anthropology has also contributed to the identification and uncovering of contexts where bodies were deposited as well as the treatment of the body and the effects of post-depositional processes (Dirkmaat et al. 2008; Ubelaker 1996; Groen et al. 2015, among others). Forensic anthropology has also used sociocultural approaches to collect information from witnesses and survivors from communities affected by violence (Baraybar 2008; Parra et al. 2020; Webster 1998), with the purpose of gathering as much legal evidence as possible and contrasting it with data from the sites where the bodies were deposited and the bodies themselves (Ta'ala et al. 2006). In addition to the legal and humanitarian issues, forensic anthropology has also played a very important social role in the processes of memory reconstruction (Baraybar and Blackwell 2014; Ferrándiz 2006; Renshaw 2007; Sant Cassia 2006, among others). Other new approaches to forensic anthropology have begun to emerge from the cultural perspective (Rodríguez 2021).

7. See UNODC 2019: *Various circumstances, motivations, and relationships can act as driving forces of homicide, and they are often overlapping and multifaceted. Although it can sometimes be difficult to distinguish between the different elements that drive homicide, the Global Study on Homicide uses a classification of homicide into three main typologies: homicide related to interpersonal conflict, homicide related to criminal activities, and homicide related to sociopolitical agendas.*
8. See the Report of the Special Rapporteur of the Human Rights Council on extrajudicial, summary, or arbitrary executions. A/75/384.
9. We are using the phrase “to kill, kill again, and over-kill” (originally in Spanish, “matar, rematar y contramatar”) in the sense proposed by Uribe (1990) and Sémelin (2007).

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