

HERMINIO MARTINS

## INTRODUCTION

## TRISTES DURÉES

How do we account for the spread of historical studies of death throughout the Western world in the last fifteen years or so? Some critics of this historiographic movement have tried to derive it from the circumstances of the long domestic and international peace in the West - in comparative terms - as well as the lack of biological catastrophes like the pandemic which after World War I resulted in more victims than the armed conflict itself. Such an unusual period in social demography with steadily rising life-expectancies and the relative absence of mass violence within and between Western polities is supposed to have precipitated - perhaps in conjunction with the pervasive balance of thermonuclear terror - a rising concern amongst humanistic scholars with the institutions of death *per se*, rather than with the natural and social causations of human death. This curious resort to intuitions in the area of the sociology of knowledge, linking the Pax Americana to the changing distribution of interests and research agendas in the historical profession, may perhaps stem from the barely disguised sense that the topicalization of death in the contemporary historiographic consciousness is an aberrant, perhaps even irrational phenomenon that calls for explanation. This is a very questionable presupposition, deriving from a metaphysic of radical secularism which in itself cannot become the yardstick of the researchable without serious questioning. On the contrary, it could be argued that the systematic disattending to the practices and beliefs concerning human death by standard historiography, when such a large proportion of the material culture and artistic legacy of the past in every civilization is manifestly death-concerned, has been the result of a persistent *epoché* or suspension of interest in the phenomena under study, which however warranted heuristically could not become permanent without seriously

vitiating historical knowledge. Social anthropologists have never been guilty of this particular failing, although curiously enough it is only recently that historians have used to any significant extent the analytical insights, conceptual tools and background knowledge achieved in this area by anthropologists - at least since Robert Hertz's and Arnold van Gennep's classic works. A landmark in the social anthropology of contemporary institutions was the work of Lloyd Warner in his series on 'Yankee City', in which one of the volumes was devoted to this area of the cultural symbolization and ceremonialization of death although it had comparatively little impact at the time.

A less contentious factor that surely accounts to some degree for the high receptivity within and outside academia to the 'new history of death' has been the social criticism of Western death practices especially prominent in the USA which developed in the 1960s and which eventually generated an abundant literature, the bulk of which is certainly partisan, practical, clinical, pedagogic, repertorial but which also includes a good deal of significant scholarly work (although all the adjectives listed can also apply to the latter, to be sure). One of the earliest - one hesitates to say the earliest but I do not know of any other candidate for this accolade - texts in the English-speaking world of social criticism of contemporary practices concerning the dying, the dead and the bereaved was Geoffrey Gorer's article in the magazine *Encounter* (October 1955) entitled 'The Pornography of Death'. Gorer's argument, which eventually became a cliché, was that the waning of Victorian taboos concerning sexuality had taken place concomitantly with the rise of interdictions and obligatory silences concerning death, leading to a kind of social invisibility of death and considerable restraints in certain social strata on the expression of grief and the practice of mourning. His subsequent social survey in Britain, published in 1965, seemed to confirm the general line of argument, although marked class and regional differences were noted. I know of no substantial British studies since then, although it would seem plausible to believe that the phenomena described by Gorer are more prevalent today and more uniformly spread across stratificational and regional demarcations than at the time of his social survey.

It is noteworthy that although the self-image of British sociology over the last quarter-century has persistently been of a critical, radical, oppositional, demystifying, even alienated discipline, certainly by comparison with American sociology, the topic of contemporary British death institutions which to outsiders seem to represent an extreme case in the spectrum of Western variants (even allowing for the special consideration that Presbyterian Scotland deserves as an exception to British national norms in this area) gets barely a mention in its considerable scholarly output. This is in contrast to American sociology, which even in its more conservative or complacent heyday produced the first ethnographies of contemporary hospital death and the first debates on the nature and evaluative import of contemporary death attitudes as a major indicator of the quality of American civilization.

It seems that in the area of death there is no quarrel between British sociology and British society although criticism of most other institutions - gender and the family, ideology and established science, class, power, status, language practices - has been elaborate, sharp, often vastly documented and copiously argued. Across the Channel, French sociology and anthropology have used theoretical sources similar to those used in British social thought - e.g. Critical Theory - to analyze contemporary Western death in comparative and historical perspective, using the familiar Anglo-Marxist categories of capitalism, alienation, reification as well as Heideggerian hermeneutics. The silence of British sociology and social anthropology concerning contemporary Western death institutions, especially in Britain itself, is anomalous in terms of their counterparts elsewhere in the Western world. The reception of Foucault in the last few years might produce a shift in view of Foucault's well-known interest in the political anatomy of the body and the micro-political management of life and death processes in increasingly scientized organizational settings like hospitals, prisons, schools, etc. But such a heavily politicizing reading of institutions detracts from the proper consideration of the *tremendum* of death and the necessarily and radically symbolic perception of death's mystery as constitutive of the human condition. The failure of British social thought in this area, in contrast to both French and American social science, brings out the atrophy of the metaphysical and moral imagination of the underlying scholarly community particularly clearly; doubtless reasons of a structural kind could be advanced in accordance with the prevalent methodological dogma (in British social science) of the primacy of structural determinations uneasily married to an anti-positivistic, pro-hermeneutic bias. Although practically everyone is formally against 'positivism' as a methodological doctrine, what is perhaps the core of positivism - the prohibition of metaphysics ('there is no *depth*', Neurath used to say) - remains effective, although now that by ministerial whim the 'social sciences' have lost that title the quondam 'social scientists' will not have to strive so hard to avoid fundamental thought and the cultivation of the metaphysical imagination (the comparative study of civilizations can provide salutary training in this, and the transculturation that social and cultural anthropologists generally undergo partially exempts them from the strictures I have advanced; an extreme form of cultural relativism can turn it from a heuristic into a stultifying dogma). As there is nothing that is more capable of generating metaphysical concern among human beings than the *fatum* or the *factum* of death there is perhaps some point to the avoidance of death topics by those committed to the intramundaneity of scholarly endeavour and social practice.

There is a more specific point that should be made here, although it emerges from the recent spate of historical studies of death: the institutions of Western death are closely connected with the history of Western individualism as a system of cultural values and a nexus of enabling and sustaining legal and political practices (testamentary norms and their bearing on kinship

institutions being an obviously critical instance). To neglect the institutions of human death is also to neglect the questions concerning individuation and personhood, or at least important phases thereof. The recent numerous challenges to Mauss's famous essay of 1938 on the category of the person represent challenges to its vindication of Western moral and political individualism following from the overthrow of the category of the subject from epistemology, the soul from psychology, the mind from behavioural studies, the agent from structuralism (in some versions at least), or the replacement of the human agent by the extraordinarily skeletal surrogates to be found in rational choice theory (yet another avatar of utilitarianism), or in diluted versions of Kantian moral philosophy. The great essays of Hertz on death and Mauss on the person should be read together now that we can appreciate in the light of recent historical work how every great transformation in the moral history of Western individualism has been closely linked to changes in the regimes of death perception and modes of making sense of it embodied in varied iconologies, the best-studied cases being those concerning the great transformations of the 11th-12th centuries in the Latin Christian West, long before the dubiously argued emergence of 'possessive individualism' in the Puritan-bourgeois world. The attack on the Maussian defence of Western personalism - the choice of the term 'person' rather than 'individual' is not solely Durkheimian in inspiration since it goes back to the pro-socialist neo-Kantian thinker Renouvier - is not inspired solely or primarily by the need to relativize the more dated aspects of his formulations. Certainly a good deal of Western social theory in every branch of the social studies is metaphysically problematical because it is so often so unreflectively the by-product of a general mentality which could be reasonably characterized - to paraphrase a famous saying - as 'Protestantism minus Christianity', or the self-reflection of a residually Protestant outlook; and in fact a good deal of early social science even to the early 1920s was in a literal sense the product of Protestant ministers or their offspring, but the really decisive factor was the pervading outlook and the attempts to socialize or sociologize a primordial religious individualism. (How odd that T.H. Huxley's witty saying about Comte's 'religion of humanity' - 'Catholicism minus Christianity' - should be so widely recalled. After all, Comte's venture failed and the other version of social and philosophical thought - 'Protestantism minus Christianity' - although or perhaps because it has been the dominant one, goes unrecognized under that accurate, thought-provoking description.)

To take the institutions of death and of personhood as interdependent is to cross-check in an illuminating way both our sociological and our metaphysical intuitions concerning forms of life and the meanings of death which radically characterize them. To abolish the subject in epistemology or the agent in social theory are perhaps magical incantations against death, although there are innumerable ways of providing accounts of human society whether in the concern over the microfoundations of social theory or in

holistic macrotheory where death is treated largely as a boundary condition of human action rather than the matrix and the radical horizon of human existence - essentially an actuarial or praxeological view of the matter. It is disconcerting to note that in the vigorous and protracted apotheosis of consciousness as the ground of social cognition which became so central in British social theory (and to a lesser extent in the wider English-speaking world) the radically horizontal character of death is rarely made much of.

Yet Schutz, the key figure in the reception of phenomenology in social science in the English-speaking world - at least until the Heideggerian exegetical industry took off, although whether phenomenology can truly include Heidegger's idiosyncrasies is a moot point - made the case for the centrality of death in basic sociology - i.e. the account of how human beings construe the world in the commonsense understandings that make society possible. One may not agree with the formulation which invokes certain axiological peculiarities as appertaining to the *homo humanus* rather than to *homo faber*, but on the whole it is worth evoking here partly because although contained in a famous paper 'on multiple realities' it has led to little elaboration compared to so many other theses of this influential thinker.

[The whole system of relevances which govern us within the natural attitude is founded upon the basic experience - of each of us: I know that I shall die and I fear to die. This basic experience we suggest calling the *fundamental anxiety*. It is the primordial anticipation from which all the others originate. From the fundamental anxiety spring the many interrelated systems of hopes and fears, of wants and satisfactions, of chances and risks which incite man within the natural attitude to attempt the mastery of the world, to overcome obstacles, to draft projects, and to realize them.

One could hardly be more emphatic about what one might call the matrix-character of death in the primordial human world of the 'natural attitude' of commonsense realism, the 'paramount reality' of the world of working. It could be followed through the other subuniverses of reality or the 'finite provinces of meaning' which we variously occupy - the world of play and ludic activities including the *fêtes* which have become the preoccupation of much social history and contemporary social commentary, the world of dreams, of phantasms, of the scientific construals of the nature of things. These 'multiple realities' are characterized by specific tensions of consciousness, specific *epochés* or suspensions of doubt (the Cartesian move being a radical suspension of the suspension of doubt), experiences of the self, etc. It may be noted that the transitions across multiple realities are characterized by leaps or 'shocks' of consciousness, the phenomenological correlates or counterparts of the liminalities in the forms of life that are so central to the anthropological perspective, with death

as in some ways the paradigm-case of liminality certainly forcing the essential features of the phenomenon, as it were, out into the open (Mauss, in reacting critically to van Gennep, had already warned that one could all too easily see liminalities or transitions everywhere; but some inflation is inevitable when one introduces new analytical terms). In the often enthusiastic reception of Schutzian phenomenology - welcomed partly because its emphasis on consciousness afforded relief from statistical empiricism and normative functionalism - his focus on death has played almost no part. It is true that sociological ethnographies of hospital death in contemporary America have in fact been guided by theoretical perspectives akin and indebted to Schutz's, but they lack any sense of the centrality of death in general social theory or global social evaluation.

Social criticism and commentary on how we die in the West today has produced such a large body of literature that it is impossible to review it adequately in anything less than a monograph. But some of the salient lines of argument should be picked out here as they inevitably form the background to inquiries into the death systems of other cultures and periods. The danger here is not so much that the dominant modes of Western death today could be regarded in the classical evolutionist or even neo-evolutionary way as the peak of social or cultural evolutionary development, although in some American discussions of the 1960s a sophisticated version of this type of argument was put forward with regard to specific American death practices rather than with regard to those that have become increasingly common to all advanced industrial Western societies (the British version is so different from the American that a special case would have to be made for its evolutionary index). In cognitive-developmental terms again it would be difficult even in the Piaget-Kohlberg model of levels of moral development to assess our death practices as ranking at the top of the scale in terms of the criteria of universalism, reversibility, egalitarianism and the like, at least in overall terms. Rather the danger has been to idealize the past or at any rate to compare unfavourably British death practices, especially since about 1945, with late-Victorian ones or American death ways with those prevailing in some pastoral or Puritan period. I shall briefly recall the social criticism of contemporary dominant Western death ways which do not of course hold good uniformly across religious, ethnic and regional diversity but represent or purport to represent certain typical and unfolding tendencies, especially in the USA and England, making up a kind of 'developmental ideal type' but operating by diffusion and/or endogenous mechanisms elsewhere in the West - certainly in France for example. Social critics are strongly tempted to 'invent' - in the classical rhetorical sense of 'finding' or 'retrieving' for an argumentative discourse rather than in the contemporary sense of 'making' without precedents - a utopia of human death enacting the central value of dignity through its cosmology and rituals. Thus Francophone social scientists have been especially prone to find these death utopias in Black Africa or Afro-Brazilian cults even in the social context of underprivilege

and, on occasion, of punitive social controls. Modernization theory rarely made explicit the implication that in modernizing societies orientations to death would also change and the 'Westernization' of death would also be one of the social costs incurred. Within the Western world where American society has been the paramount model in many ways it is however less appropriate to speak of an 'Americanization' than of an 'Anglicization' of death since it is the English version of Western death that seems to be spreading more widely (the American practice of impermanent embalming, the viewing of the embalmed corpse by relatives and friends, the wake etc. is not a cultural package that has been exported much), both in the thanatopraxis of cremation which is spreading even in Portugal with the blessing of the Catholic Church and in the cultural ideals of dying with 'a minimum of fuss and embarrassment', the hiding of grief and the steady disappearance of mourning (or at least the growing lack of institutional support for such practices). The result is a kind of social invisibility of death. An important point in comparing the American and the British orientations to death is that the strength of civil religion in American society is in some ways much greater and the death system in American culture is much more closely implicated with civil religion than in other Western societies - a phenomenon already noted by Lloyd Warner in his classic discussion of Memorial Day in Yankee City (he did not, of course, use the expression 'civil religion', but he did portray it nevertheless, especially its integration with the institutions of the cemetery and funeral rituals). All these phenomena are of course subject to creoscentic change but despite the exuberance of social movements and the articulateness of social critics in American society, the pattern has shown considerable tenacity - just as death historians like Ariès would have posited since death systems typically partake of the time-scale of the *longues durées*, slow to take shape and capable of enduring in their basic format for many decades and even several centuries. American civil religion was partly reshaped by the emergence of Lincoln as one of the central culture-heroes, and the characteristic practice of temporary embalming started with the Civil War. Wars, whether international or civil, can play a part in redefinitions of death though the Second World War had perhaps a less specific and tangible impact than the First, without such cultural innovations as the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier and the Cenotaph (resisted in the British War Cabinet as an improper concession to Celtic emotionalism, although it turned out to be a success in terms of public response beyond all expectations).

I will briefly summarize some of the main lines of recent social criticism of contemporary Western death ('normal', non-violent death especially) under four headings.

(i) The hospitalisation and medicalisation of death (as of birth) as the typical locus and context of death which in recent years has encompassed an ever larger proportion of the population through life's termini. This phenomenon lies at the intersection of several analytically distinct but often empirically coincident

trajectories and trends in the history of the modern West: the encroachment of 'total institutions' (which of course lack 'institutionality' in the sense of moral consensus and cultural sedimentation) upon ever more specialized and differentiated spheres of life; the increasing techno-bureaucratic administration of human beings, with its consequent processing according to impersonal rules and bureaucratic equity, and regular credentialism (which involves the dead too, for legal death hinges on certification); the intervention of 'medical apperception' (the best translation I can offer for Foucault's famous phrase '*le regard médical*') in the consideration of human crises or the increasing scope of medical definitions of human reality, predicated on a sense of the legitimacy, *sui generis*, of biomedical science and a very fast tempo of advance in curative medicine (though medical interventionism is not uniquely related to prevalence of instrumental activism in the general value system, as the examples of the British predilection for psychosurgery or the Brazilian medical emphasis on Caesarian births indicate). The very definition of death has been changed in the statute books of many polities as a result of the Harvard conceptualization of brain-death as the criterion or the master indicator of human death proper; it is questionable whether the redefinition of death by biomedical science does more than erode commonsense understandings. By making death more and more a matter of medical decision to withdraw life-support systems, with all the medico-legal and deontological problems involved, the dying person and the family become subordinate to techno-scientific authority. Recent tragic cases in everyone's memory illustrate this vexed issue. Countertrends partly grounded on concern over iatrogenesis and the medicalisation of society as in itself a pathogenic phenomenon, as well as ethnographic studies showing the brutalization that may be incurred in the techno-bureaucratic management of total institutions, have led to the rise and spread of the hospice movement which goes some way towards mitigating the harsher features of medicalised death.

It is still remarkable in the light of the episodes of social protest and collective outburst against changes in death practices which ecclesiastical and/or political authorities have tried to implement on repeated occasions against local social customs and collective representations - one major episode in the intermittent war in Europe over these issues is discussed in the paper by Feijó and Pina-Cabral in this volume, and Ariès in his *magnum opus* discusses the successful resistance to another such move in the early Third Republic - that the emergence of contemporary Western deathways in the last sixty years has in practice taken place with comparatively little to note in the shape of significant social protest. This is particularly striking in view of the notorious resistance to scientization, e.g. in the anti-fluoridation movement in the USA and the environmental, ecology or 'green' movements of one sort or another. Even more generally death-focussed social movements in the USA have been relatively exiguous, the tiny cryogenic movement being a good case in point. Animal liberation and anti-vivisection movements that oppose not only cruel animal

death inflicted by humans under techno-scientific auspices but also other forms of killing animals have been more prominent and certainly illuminate the depth of our sense of death. It is worth noticing that 'green' protests have not had more impact upon definitions of human death in societies allegedly dominated by a 'productivist' ideology and a Promethean attitude to the non-human environment, especially in view of the pantheistic or naturalistic world images associated with some currents of this family of movements. This is perhaps because changes in Western deathways have taken place in recent decades largely through creative processes in civil society without the great initiatives that ecclesiastical and political leaderships have taken in the past to bring about rapid, overt conformity with official norms. The spread of cremation, for instance, has been largely promoted by voluntary associations bringing about permissive changes in the statute law, under the legitimating appeals of scientific rationality and utilitarian standards of public hygiene and lack of *Lebensraum*, although an examination of the literature of such associations reveals more primordial evocations of fire imagery and redemption through fire; indeed the mingling of rational-utilitarian considerations and magical-alchemical images is quite symptomatic of quite a range of contemporary esoteric beliefs outside formal religious institutions.

(ii) The deritualization of death. This is apparent most strikingly perhaps not only in the contraction of religious observances *per se* but also in the virtual extinction of mourning from some sectors of Western society. This is not simply a by-product of secularism in the more operational sense of that term: an important example is the transformation of Catholic liturgy, specifically of one of the key sacraments of the post-Tridentine Catholicism, an enduring and distinctive institution which millions of the faithful have taken for granted, the Extreme Unction now changed (and renamed) to the Unction for the Sick (the change in the name compresses a theologico-liturgical revolution). Changes in procedure and wording of that sacrament and the prescribed mode of its application involve a reconceptualization of death which pastoral practice may modify, since the religious history of Christian death demonstrates how local definitions of reality can prove resistant and lead to reinterpretations of considerable significance in actual religious or socio-religious experience. But the recent activist disposition of many priests, in conflict with local religion, especially in Portugal, replicates within the Church the struggle of enthusiastic 'enlightened' modernizers against 'backward', 'ignorant', 'superstitious' villagers (formerly dismissed by liberals and republicans, and later by Communists and urbanites, as 'priest-ridden' peasants managed via the pulpit and the confessional). This activism may well reduce the Church eventually to an enlightened minority divorced from oral tradition, ascriptive communities and the received natural symbols of age and gender as well as, at the national level, from any clear central tradition (becoming in a sense the mirror-image of the sect-type Communist Party).

(iii) The decay of the language of or discourse about death. From the perspective of the cultural sociology of modernity Zijderveld has pointed to the remarkable ubiquity of the cliché as the linguistic currency of an abstract society which parallels the decline of what Benjamin called 'aura' in our experience of art in an age of the mechanical and electronic reproduction of images. If contemporary Western society is eminently cliché-genic no other area of human concern is as impoverished thereby as the expression of the affects about the dead, death and the dying: before the ineffable and the unspeakable the resources of illocutionary or performative speech-acts are strained to the utmost, and the ritual languages of the past which rendered allusively, through tropes and metaphorical observances that which defies expression, have become attenuated. The language of 'shifters', of liminalities, has been demagicalized by theological purists and ecclesiastical modernizers who seem to want to enlist in the generic ranks of 'transition technicians' like morticians and counsellors, whilst their custodianship of religious language, prophetic speech and kerygmatic witness appears to be relegated to the more conservative laity. It is odd that whilst the corruption of political language has been the subject of very remarkable analyses from varied perspectives of literary criticism and semiotics, the decay of death discourse and even more generally the hermeneutics of death languages has not attracted a similar degree of attention. Yet in dealing with the phenomenon of collective death, especially the genocidal acts of the 20th century, some have dared to articulate a way of speaking about the evil with dignity. The attempts to face the generic human phenomenon of natural rather than wholly man-made evil in Western society betray a lack of resources of cultural expression and widely received spirituality that the *artes moriendi* of the past were able to convey.

(iv) The meaninglessness of death. This topic as a component of the cultural criticism of the age became quite prominent amongst the German philosophical sociologists of the first quarter of this century, for complex reasons which deserve consideration but which cannot be discussed here. Suffice it to say that often Simmel, Scheler and Weber, *qua* philosophers rather than *qua* sociologists, advanced analyses of remarkable prescience concerning the cultural crisis of death definition in contemporary Western society as a historically specific phenomenon. Max Weber saw the peculiar meaninglessness of death in the West as a result of the process of the disenchantment of the world, one of the master-trends of recent 'universal history'. Disenchantment can also be translated as demagicalization, and he saw this a knowledge-situation in which 'no mysterious incalculable forces ... come into play, but rather that one can, in principle, master all things by calculation'. Through a reading of Tolstoy he seems to have embraced the view that he imputed to the Russian literary prophet:

... for civilized man death has no meaning ... because the individual life of civilized man, placed into an



infinite "progress".... Abraham, or some peasant of the past, died "old and satiated with life" because he stood in the organic cycle of life; because his life, in terms of its meaning and on the eve of his days, had given to him what life had to offer; because for him there remained no puzzles he might wish to solve; and therefore he had "enough" of life. Whereas civilized man, placed in the midst of the continuous enrichment of culture by ideas, knowledge and problems, may become "tired of life" but not "satiated with life". He catches only the most minute part of what the life of the spirit brings forth ever anew, and what he seizes is always something provisional and not definitive and therefore death for him is a meaningless occurrence. And because death is meaningless, civilized life as such is meaningless; by its very "progressiveness" it gives death the imprint of meaninglessness.

These eloquent words, it is pertinent to note, were uttered in his famous public lecture 'Science as a Vocation' delivered in 1919 at the request of meaning-hungry university students. (It has been claimed by Goldmann that Weber's friend Lukacs was a key figure in the history of modern death-thought by raising the issue of death in his metaphysics of tragedy and the theory of the novel as the epic of a God-forsaken world: the 'tragic vision of the world' as a basic world-image requires a solution to the meaninglessness of death via a move classically described as 'Pascal's wager', presumably exemplified by Lukacs' virtual overnight conversion to Bolshevism as the carrier of the mission of world-redemption assigned to the proletarian class in the epic of world-history. That was not a typical path to Communism, even amongst hyper-civilized intellectuals, but it does raise questions concerning the problem of meaning, soteriology and Marxist commitment.)

'Therapeutic positivism' in its many versions, including a good deal of contemporary psychiatry and more generally those forms of thought sometimes called 'Gnostic' which interdict ultimate questions, simply reflect and complement the mechanisms of social control which techno-economic constraints already exercise. In an oblique, allusive and circuitous way death-thought now often takes the form of thought about death-thought, and an important factor in this partial liberation from (non-Comtist) positivism has been the emergence of the new history of death. The breakthrough in scholarly receptivity and appreciation by the general educated public was achieved by the more or less simultaneous appearance of books by Ariès and Vovelle. The duality of this co-founding of the new field is striking. Ariès has been an independent scholar until recently without an academic attachment, earning his livelihood in the commercial world; Vovelle a career academic whose great book was a grand thesis in the *doctorat d'état* tradition which established him in the professorial mandarinat. Ariès comes from a Catholic right-wing traditionalist milieu, perhaps the finest historian to come from the world of the Action

Française who now describes himself as a 'conservative anarchist'; Vovelle, a Marxist, a member of the French Communist Party and a contributor to its journals, a Secularist interested in what he called 'dechristianisation' as part and parcel of the process of enlightenment. Ariès stresses the unimportance of political and ideological change in bringing about major transformations in death attitudes and claims that changes take place in the 'collective unconscious', at the interface of the biological and the cultural, processed through the non-conceptual *pensée confuse* or the realm that some epistemologists have called tacit knowledge and metaphysical intuition or 'constellations of absolute presuppositions', in principle not available to current consciousness, naive or critical. As against the emphasis on *mentalités* Vovelle claims the causal efficacy of articulated idea-systems or *idéologies* (*pensée claire* - relatively speaking), such as the cultural changes the illuminist campaigns of the Enlightenment presumptively brought about, although he tries to reconcile the reasonable claims that can be made both for *mentalités* and ideologies in a comprehensive analysis of deep changes in world outlook. Ariès has done the more sweeping work, covering eight hundred years of Western history whilst Vovelle in his classic thesis concentrated on a quite limited stretch of historic time and space and a homogeneous time-series of documents.

Some commentators, especially in the English-speaking world, although quite happy to use Ariès as someone to research and write against, go through the characteristic pretence that one should never write with the ambitious aims of Ariès but rather follow Vovelle's modest research practice with well-circumscribed aims and a consolidated data base preferably cliometrically manageable with a 'serial' character. If that criticism became a universally followed maxim there would be no-one to write against, the scholarly norms of the *doctorat d'état* would enjoy a cognitive monopoly and in the end death would cease to be good-to-think. Fortunately for the time being one Ariès can license many critical articles which otherwise would seem pointless. Although the differences between the two scholars are very real it would run counter to the avowed precepts of both to try to drive a wedge between the two styles of analysis (or indeed to contrast the historical synthesis of one to the more analytical approach of the other, since Vovelle has just published an important work of synthesis). Both involve a broadly hermeneutic approach in which literary, epigraphic, architectural, generally iconographic and iconological evidences are marshalled for their cross-implications in order to construct 'meaningful totalities' for distinct historical periods. Some hermeneutic theorists in the English-speaking world seem to advocate the hermeneusis of text-families in relatively limited segments of historical time, if only because semantic change and diversity are such that only intimacy with the mental universe of small thought-communities can be relatively secure from gross error and anachronism (Koyréan history of scientific thought demands the same kind of discipline). The Ariès-Vovelle approach combines a broad hermeneutic practice with a strong interest in

the determination of historical periods, not of course as discrete chunks of historical time but rather as moments of prevalence of one paramount but never exclusive death-attitude against others (if meaning, strictly speaking, is always 'local' then this approach is radically mistaken, but this precept-like methodological solipsism in the history of post-Cartesian Western philosophy would seem to invalidate cognitive practices which are inescapable in any case). There is a further commonality between Ariès and Vovelle: as the latter has explicitly argued, the death ways of a society provide an important key to assessing the quality of its life, an important ingredient of the moral criticism of a form of life, though Vovelle has not been as emphatic in characterizing Western death today as 'wild' (*sauvage*). Both may be seen as members of the *Annales* school, but whilst the categories of *longues durées* as the proper subject-matter of historical knowledge (not just of events or social institutions - to refer to the famous debate between historians and sociologists in the Durkheimian period) and of *mentalités* (as against the focus of conventional history of ideas) are integral to the shared capital of the school, the concept of 'attitudes' towards life and death as a relatively autonomous substratum of psycho-history is a distinctive Arièsian contribution. It seems odd that a practising member of a creedal ecclesia should so discount the impact of explicit doctrinal beliefs on the orientations to life and death even of the intellectual elites, for the very concept of 'orthodoxy' is a Western innovation, predicated on an exclusivist religion of the book, where formal theological rationalization has been consistently transmitted to the laity through a variety of organizational channels of which the mendicant orders in the urban medieval world were a successful example.

Recent neo-Marxists who have disputed the 'dominant ideology thesis' which claims that the ideological incorporation of the subordinated strata is a prerequisite for the stability of 'feudal' or 'capitalist' societies, and argue instead that ideological production is largely by and for the dominant strata, would concur with the thesis of the relative inefficacy of ideologies for the purposes of securing mass consent to the established order (Gramscian 'hegemony' is thus neither necessary nor possible for Western societies). Over the long run the recent historical studies of death ways do seem to point not only to the importance of elites - whether religious or lay - in reformulating thanatological orientations, but also on their effective diffusion to urban-bourgeois and artisan strata and beyond, although causal imputations in the etiology of such large-scale, long-period processes are certainly hazardous. Diffusionist models are back in fashion, not least in economic history; the propagation of cultural innovations in this sphere may not strictly follow general laws of collective imitation, but the detailed tracing of diffusion of testamentary practices in the urban mercantile and artisan world of 12th-century Avignon in the recent important monograph by Chiffolleau would seem to suggest a definite efficacy in the spread of new deathways from the great historic laboratories of cultural

creation, namely the Western Latin monastic institutions. It was there that a new sense of time - that the rational ordering of communal life according to the schedules of clock- and calendar time - as well as constitutional procedures of self-government and regular elections (veritable nuclei of Western politics) were elaborated, and spread via the mendicant orders to the urban milieu. To be sure, merchant capitalism with its rational accounting - if not yet rational by Pacioli's standards - and a new sense of commercial time interacted with the religiously grounded time-discipline and salvation-economy to generate a new calculus of masses for the dead and the construction of testaments as veritable charters of salvation arithmetic after the death of the testator. This shift was connected with the concomitant spread of the new model of Purgatory, now seen no longer as a limbo but a well-defined region of religious space and time in the great Beyond. This new model was not so much a direct response to the religious needs of the masses but, just like the cult of the saints which it would be equally facile to impute to the magical garden of the unrationalized world of the plebeian or peasant status groups, originated with religious virtuosi and spread over a long period to the lower urban and rural strata. To be sure, such transmissions of cultural practices across strata do not guarantee meaning-invariance, but the same is true in terms of meaning and use in the case of the 'hardware' of the technologies of production of the means of material life.

Whatever may be the fate of Arièsian periodization of Western death systems from the early Middle Ages to the 'wild' death of the present - or indeed of other similar schemes of the social and cultural history of Occidental deathways - it is surely striking that in a time-span of less than a millennium several appreciably different death regimes have obtained in succession within the same civilization. It is not clear whether in the lands of Orthodox Christianity, let alone other civilizations, such a complex and variegated set of historic phases of death systems of analogous scale and scope could be discriminated in the same or comparable analytical fashion. Ariès distinguished five death systems from the *Chanson de Roland* onwards involving variations in four themes - awareness of the individual, the defence of society against nature, belief in an after-life and belief in the existence of evil. Whilst the dynamic of Western civilization has been traced so often to technology and economy, it seems clear that instability in death systems has been also a very marked feature of it. To be sure, the civilizations of the 'Axial Age' - the cultural breakthroughs of the first millennium BC in the Eastern Mediterranean and in Asia - all involved major changes in orientations to death. But since palaeo-Christian days, within the same great cultural-religious continuum, religiously grounded - though not uniquely or completely determined by the Church elites - transformations in overall death systems have occurred at a number of junctures. The central fact of the literal human death of Christ, which required a resurrection, made death more salient in this religious outlook. The concern over the ontology and theology

of personhood manifest in the Nicene Creed and the Latin Christian interpretations thereof has been a constant and potent factor in consecutive elaborations of religiously validated soteriological and ecclesiological doctrines, which over the longest *durées* have unintendedly contributed to the formation of the distinctive type of the *homo aequalis* in the sharpest possible contrast, as the phrase implies, to the *homo hierarchicus* of the Hindu caste system.

Each death regime, far from being confined to the religious and aristocratic elites, seems to have reached nondominant status groups - partly through recurrent evangelizing campaigns, partly through the mechanism of the *habitus* which Panofsky boldly claimed (with religious architecture and scholastic philosophy informed by the same mental dispositions), now generalized by Bourdieu as a general principle of social formations, and partly through the multiple channels of cultural diffusion available in societies where the fashion principle became so important. Hence sumptuary laws proved consistently unavailing, and moreover a bitter hostility to the emulation of non-nobles was rife in the Paris of the Sun-King. There is indeed much truth in Harré's contention that in 'the iconography of clothing there is a ready-made model for all forms of social change' which deserves 'the closest possible study'. Kroeber in his pioneering study (with J. Richardson) of the parameters of change in women's dress fashion in the West seems to have pursued a similar intimation before embarking on his monumental study of the configurations of cultural growth in the major civilizations. However the fashion principle seems to have operated more pervasively in the West, and especially the Latin Christian West, than in most other civilizations in more spheres of life and ranging more widely in social space. In reacting against the emulation in mortuary rituals, baroque practices for instance both led to literal and figurative inflation in terms of cost and symbolic elaboration, and eventually to the emergence of new social boundary markers extolling simplicity, sobriety, modesty and privacy (similar mechanisms may have been at work in the eventual reversal of Victorian death practices). To be sure, this is only one facet of a very complex story (but the arrest of fashion has always been a goal of utopian projects to ensure a self-perpetuating standard of human perfection or social steady-state).

The social-historical studies of death in the current state of the art tend to follow one or the other of two perspectives which we may encapsulate as the 'symbolic' and the 'strategic'. In the 'symbolic' perspective one studies death through the prism of cosmology and community, collective and individual representations, mortuary rites, the cultural regulation of the emotions, thanatopraxis, mourning customs, the iconology of death. In the 'strategic' perspective, at least in the West, testamentary dispositions concerning property, office and position are a prime object of study in order to analyze the calculations of testators - and their anticipations of the reactions of heirs - as well as the actual outcomes in the effective redistribution of transmissible immobile and mobile wealth and claims. Testaments of course can

be studied profitably from either perspective depending on the roles they play in the moral or salvation economy or in 'real' resource allocation to other economic agents. I call the second perspective strategic partly because the leading and certainly very influential exponent of it, Prof. J. Goody, stresses 'strategies of heirship' so critically in his various studies including his major recent book - something like a sociology of the testamentary institution - *The Development of the Family and Marriage in Europe* (Cambridge 1983).

The essays in this volume mirror the state of the art in that they can roughly be divided into two groups according to the main emphasis in the specific studies. I think it not unfair to claim the studies by Goldey, Feijó and Pina-Cabral, as well as the literary and cultural-historical studies by Earle and Santos Silva, for the former perspective, and the remaining essays by O'Neill, Ms Brandão and Ms Durães for the latter. Of course the same author may assume one or the other perspective in different texts, or try to combine the two perspectives in the same work, although it is usually convenient and often demanded by the research setting or academic occasion that one or the other perspective should prevail in a given text. It is not certainly a preference for order or conflict models that dictates the choice of perspectives: the papers by Goldey and by Feijó and Pina-Cabral both refer to conflict between value-orientations, and the latter paper analyses the background to one of the most important social upheavals in the last two centuries of Portuguese history - the clash between the locally received and the imposed (by the central authorities) death systems being an important causal ingredient in the triggering of a civil armed conflict on a remarkable scale. Substantive focus and problem-interest may require the assumption of one or the other perspective in the social studies of death-centred practices. There is however, it must be admitted, a certain bias towards different metaphysical and methodological commitments in social analysis, the 'symbolic' analysts at least in historical anthropology leaning perhaps more towards a hermeneutic-holistic approach - and perhaps a little more tolerant of a non-positivistic metaphysic - whilst the 'strategic' analysts may well lean towards methodological individualism, 'etic' categories and even 'cultural materialism' (in the sense of Marvin Harris, not of Raymond Williams). This is not of course to imply anything about the actual metaphysical and methodological stances of our authors which probably do not resemble these ideal-typical very closely or predictably. Goody in the book cited above treats the Latin Christian Church as a collective actor with definite interests other than the sum or average of the material interests of its (ecclesiastical, elite) members pursuing strategies of resource appropriation over a long time-horizon but claims not to forgo methodological individualism thereby. In stressing the Gregorian movement for Church reform from the 11th century and its subsequent development as extremely consequential for the formation of a kinship system and a domestic domain highly congenial to the growth of economic individualism and a market



economy, his analysis converges in remarkable accord with Chiffolleau's monograph which to a substantial extent could be characterized as pursuing a symbolic approach to the changes in testamentary arrangements in 12th-century France (Avignon).

Readers will note the historical concerns of all the contributors: no one has indulged in synchronic functionalism or simple present-mindedness. The anthropological papers all deal with Northern Portugal but this is partly justifiable in view of the greater background knowledge available in the English-speaking world concerning the social world of the latifundia South, a substantially de-Catholicized (at least in some patent respects as in decades-old priest-parishioner ratios and the standard indicators of religious observance) area more closely articulated with the culture-mentality of the urban-industrial complex. In any case Portugal north of the Tagus has traditionally contained the majority of the population as well as the historic nucleus of the nation-state. If the phenomena outlined by O'Neill seem to represent an extreme case they illuminate general tendencies also which it would be foolish to ignore or complacently to discount. They put in perspective the claims made by and for Salazarist Portugal to embody the values of tradition, Catholicism, family and property which were accepted by many foreign observers for so long.

The paper by Santos Silva raises another range of issues. The historian, sociologist, politician Oliveira Martins systematically used the organic analogy in his speculations concerning the fate of nations. The vocabulary of 'decadence' and of its counter-process 'regeneration' was widely and almost mandatorily used for decades by social critics castigating the retardation of the Portuguese economy, society and culture in the European and indeed world scene. But even in the leading countries of the period the idiom of biological decay, 'decline' or 'degeneration' was freely used for instance in connection with the urban masses and the urban milieus as a whole collapsing biomedical evidence concerning actual morbidity with alleged social pathologies of deviance and alternative cultural practices, and even as late as the 1930s dire diagnoses of the decline of national (measured) intelligence and in the average physique of adult males were widespread in Britain. To dwell on the 'death' of human collectives, societies, civilizations will generally involve metaphors, analogies and tropes of varying import. Some have claimed that the metaphor of the biological organism is the root-metaphor of Western social and historiosophical thought from at least Plato and Aristotle to, say, contemporary functionalism. But in Nisbet's important survey of the impact of the root-metaphor of the discrete organism on the theorization of society and the pattern of historic change, the theme of mortality is quite a subsidiary one, definitely subordinate to the epic vision of the directionality of world-history as a whole. The main, though not the exclusive thread is that of world-growth stories, of serialism, of optimistic historicism, at least in the world stage. It should be noted that the expression 'the organic analogy' is seriously

misleading in that it implies that there is only one type of analogy to organic life. In addition to the discrete organism (including such versions as the 'tree' metaphor, which already occurs in the didactic of Western philosophy with Porphyry, followed by innumerable successors), organic analogons have included species, populations, biotic communities, 'colonies' and complex organisms (Taine characterized consciousness as a *polyptier d'images*), 'types', ecosystems, ecological successions, genotypes or gene pools, homeostasis, milieu interieur, etc. Even in the case of discrete organisms mortality is more easily identifiable in the case of sexually reproducing organisms than in asexual ones. In writing of the 'death' of collectivities writers may be implying not so much mortality as lack of vital tonus, adaptive capacity or malperformance in terms of specifiable indicators as stemming from covert causes: it can be the language of prophecy or moral-political evaluation in the idiom of clinical pathology, which at a given juncture may provide ready intelligibility and presumptive validity. Classical republicanism amongst other political traditions was eminently preoccupied with the sources of 'virtue' amongst the citizenry and the likelihood of 'corruption' and 'decay': Rousseau, who in some ways stands in this tradition, devoted a whole chapter of *Le contrat social* (Book Three, chap. 11) to the topic 'Of the death of the body politic'. In it he argued that the body politic, like the human body, begins to perish as soon as it is born and carries within it the causes of its destruction. But whilst it is not up to human beings to prolong their life-spans it is incumbent upon citizens and statesmen to prolong the life-span of States as far as possible - even though they are necessarily mortal.

Death as metaphor - important in the Romantic movement where organic analogies from plant life were characteristically applied to works of art and individual poems - is certainly pervasive in contemporary vocabulary but generally detached from any serious and systematic theoretical framework. As a liminal term, as the ultimate metaphor of liminality, it still carries rhetorical force in the language of social criticism, as a metaphorical predicate applied to human collectivities. This appears to be the case even though not even socio-biology has revived the type of systematic analogizing of societies and organism so common between the 1880s and ca. 1910, resorting rather to metonyms of causal determination and constraint by the genetic conditions of social existence and the agency of 'natural selection' (in itself a metaphorical expression). It would be appropriate especially, as part of a general study of Portuguese political language to inquire how far the vocabulary of decadence and death in discourse about the social, the political and the national, has persisted. National anthems in their verses sometimes curiously raise the issue of death even if only by (de)negation, as in the case of the Polish national anthem, and indeed the Portuguese (*nação valente e imortal*) does also - perhaps for the sake of emphasising the 'community of fate' involved in nationhood.