

REVIEW ESSAY

The Universality of Sex and Death

The Work of the Dead: A Cultural History of Mortal Remains by Thomas W. Laqueur
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Thomas Laqueur has made a career of writing cultural histories of sex and death. His earlier work was widely cited by anthropologists interested in sex and gender, while this multiple-award-winning book focuses on the treatment of mortal remains. Such topics raise questions about what is universal in human experience. If people everywhere must grapple with the ethics of sexual reproduction and dying, if the majority of individuals living in any society experience both sexual relations and the death of someone dear to them, and if grief and sexual desire are ubiquitous emotions, then how do history and culture matter? Though primarily an intellectual historian of the West, Laqueur invokes the work of archaeologists, biological anthropologists, and social anthropologists, and devotes the first section of his book to considerations of what is universal about the human treatment of death. He notes the archaeological studies showing that some Neanderthals buried their dead and reviews debates about whether animals also grieve, though he does not discuss the important work of Barbara King (2013) on this topic. Instead, he argues that of even greater interest than arguments about the extent of grief in other species is simply the existence of the arguments themselves: the importance of care of the dead for humans is demonstrated by the fact that humans devote so much attention to the question of whether animals also show such care (p. 91). As a foil, Laqueur invokes the words of the outrageous Greek philosopher “Diogenes (ca. 412-323 B.C.E) [who] told his students that when he died he wanted his body to be tossed over the wall where it would be devoured by beasts. He was gone; it no longer mattered to him” (p. 1). But in contrast to Diogenes’s preferences, Laqueur argues that humans everywhere refuse to leave dead bodies to the beasts; they always care for them in some way.

In the body of the book, Laqueur analyzes three transformations associated with Western modernity: a shift from burial in churchyards to burial in cemeteries, the explosive growth in practices of naming and memorializing individual dead bodies (“necronominalism”), and the rise of cremation. Yet, despite these changes, Laqueur emphasizes the universality of the human experience with death. He concludes: “I began working on [this book] many years ago, expecting to find ruptures, stages. . . . Instead I found continuity” (p. 550) and argues that caring for the dead is the way humans create their social worlds, by connecting the past with the future. Though I agree that all human societies wrestle with the problems of grief and connecting the past to the future, and find his exploration of the modern transformations of death extremely suggestive for the case of China (where I research the politics and economics of death ritual), I disagree with his use of the treatment of dead bodies as a frame for what is universal in human concerns with death and find his use of anthropological evidence selective. A greater emphasis on the treatment of

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death in non-Western societies and societies without states or writing would have yielded a different argument. First of all, some humans do allow animals to devour the flesh of the dead. One famous example is the practice of “sky burial” in Tibet. During sky burials, families turn the bodies of their loved ones over to ritual specialists who carve the body into easily consumed pieces of flesh, which are left on a platform for birds to devour. The process is so gruesome that family members do not watch, but they often make subtle enquires into the speed with which the body was consumed, as rapid consumption indicates that the deceased lived a moral life and is bound for a pleasant afterlife. Thus, Laqueur is correct in that Tibetans who select this ritual are showing concern for the well-being of the soul of a loved one, but his failure to engage with such cases in a work concerned with the universality of caring for dead bodies suggests that he has not delved deeply into the ethnographic literature on death. Laqueur also dismisses practices of cannibalism as myth, though anthropologists have argued that cannibalism existed not simply as a form of violence against vanquished others but also as a ritual process for incorporating the souls of loved ones. Like sky burial, such endocannibalism does indicate concern for the soul of the deceased but also demonstrates a markedly different attitude towards the relation of the soul to mortal remains.¹

Laqueur also declines to spell out the very different conceptions of soul implicit in the three transformations he describes. Churchyard burial was partially about securing a favorable afterlife for the soul of the deceased; cemetery burial can also be concerned with the soul’s afterlife, but not necessarily so. A modern, secular sense of memorialization implies a very different conception of soul. While individuals may perish, their spirit can be carried on by those who remain. Whether that spirit is one of the loving mother or caring father, the devoted scholar or the generous teacher, the political activist who loved the poor or the loyal patriot who died for her country, such souls need to be memorialized, commemorated, named, and remembered to help the living carry on their work. While religious senses of the soul are not necessarily declining in modernity, secular senses of the soul are proliferating, and not only because of the spread of literacy. In modern societies, one is increasingly required to choose—one’s occupation, one’s family, one’s religion, and one’s political preferences. While many choices are made in a half-hearted manner, such choices ideally should be justified because one has fully embodied the spirit associated with a given selection. Acts of memorialization articulate the spiritual ideals we might adopt in life while attributing them to the dead. The necronominalism of modern states and political movements likewise entail this conception of the soul. Modern political legitimacy requires martyrs as rallying points for particular political identities. All countries memorialize their war dead to encourage patriotism. A political movement without a soul is doomed from the start. But not all societies memorialize their dead. In his grand synthesis of ethnographic work from around the world, Philippe Descola argues that memorialization and sacrifice are “virtually unknown in totemic Australia and the regions that are, par excellence, animist, namely Amazonia and subarctic America” (2013, 228). The absence of sacrifice, memorialization, and commemoration suggest forms of funerary ritual and conceptions of the soul that vary much more widely than the conceptions of soul implicit in Laqueur’s book.

The three transformations Laqueur details are themselves fascinating. Burial in churchyards was the norm for eight hundred years of Western history (roughly 1000–1800 CE). Graves were most often unmarked or marked only temporarily, and bodies were crowded on top of each other. Proper burial in a graveyard signified one’s membership in the church community and offered opportunities for clergy to pray for one’s soul. Urbanization and greater mobility posed particular problems for the regime of churchyard burial, but

¹ See Conklin (2001) and chapter 6 of Descola (2013).

Laqueur refuses to attribute the shift to cemeteries as simply a logical reaction to urban growth and geographic mobility. He argues that clerical intransigence on the matter of burying outsiders in their churchyards was an important factor. Moreover, he demonstrates that the promotion of cemeteries reflected modernist dreams of city planning and public hygiene more than any rational logic. Cemeteries removed the dead from the city and placed them in rural, park-like settings without overcrowding. Laqueur also contends that fears of the unsanitary effects of dead bodies were overstated and backed by questionable science. Despite their stench, the germs harbored in dead bodies are much less dangerous to us than those harbored by the living. Moreover, the sheer mass of dead bodies was nothing compared to the mass of human and animal sewerage produced in urban areas. But the supposed public health threats of dead bodies were leveraged by those founding cemeteries to justify a shift to burial at their places of business.

The two other transformations tie to the shift to cemeteries. Cremation took the unfounded concerns with public hygiene to a new level. Enabled by the new technology of the blast furnace (which burned at a high enough temperature to turn even bones to ash), modern cremation was said to eliminate entirely the public health threat of decaying bodies. Some cremation advocates even saw it as leading to the end of funerary ritual, in accordance with their presumptions about the rise of scientific modes of thinking and the decline of “superstition.” But such modernist fantasies never came to be. Concern with death ritual and human remains continue, as even those grieving families who chose cremation turn their attention from the care and memorialization of dead bodies to the care and memorialization of ashes.

Necronominalism likewise ties to cemeteries, which today brim with tombstones that name the dead who rest under them. And necronominalism is not limited to cemeteries. Lists of names of the dead now appear in many places, from war memorials and the AIDS memorial quilt to the back windshields of automobiles. Laqueur traces the practice of writing the names of the dead on public lists to the nineteenth century. A significant minority of the war dead were named in the American Civil War, but by World War I governments throughout the West went to great length to list names of all of those killed in action, even when their bodies could not be located. Laqueur traces this shift to the rise of mass literacy (and the letter writing and novel reading this literacy enabled), as well as individualism in general. Now everyone has a story to tell and a name to go with that story.

Parallel transformations are taking place in China today. Forty years ago, when China was an overwhelmingly rural society, almost everyone was buried on rural land. Such burials could occur with or without a tomb (often there was only a temporary dirt mound that would be plowed under during the next planting cycle), in a collective village graveyard or on an individual family’s land. Now that over half of China’s population lives in urban areas, the majority of the deceased come to rest in cemeteries on the urban fringes. Before, almost all burials were of bodies; now the state mandates cremations (where possible, some places still lack crematoriums), and ever-greater percentages of the burials are of ashes rather than bodies. Modernist fantasies of the future of death are even stronger in today’s China than the West. Some Party cadres speak of the day when the Chinese people will stop “wasting” money on funerals and the bodies of the deceased will simply be given to the authorities for organ transplant and medical research. But the rise of cremation has not ushered in such changes. Urban Chinese still spend significant sums on funerary rituals and the burial of cinerary caskets in cemeteries. And now almost all burials are marked with tombstones on which the names of the deceased (graves typically house the ashes of a married couples under one tombstone) as well as surviving family members are carved. However, necronominalism is perhaps not quite as modern in China as it was in Europe, as some male villagers had their

names inscribed on ancestral tablets or scrolls during the imperial period. So, in China there have been shifts from familial graves to cemeteries, a state mandated rise in cremation (but no accompanying decline of burial, as almost all chose to bury the ashes in cinerary caskets), and a shift from recording the names of male ancestors in the records of patrilineal (and sometimes on tombs) to recording the names of all deceased (male, female, parents, childless adults and children) on tombstones. These shifts link more tightly to the logics of urbanization in China than in the West, as there simply was no equivalent of the churchyard that could have served as a communal burial spot after urbanization. Finally, modernist fantasies about the end of superstition and pristinely clean cities have powerful state backing in China, so many city governments attempt to keep cemeteries and all aspects of death ritual far away from city centers.

In short, Laqueur's cultural history can illuminate much about situations like that of contemporary China. Yet we must remember that China, like the West during the period of Laqueur's focus, is a society undergoing rapid urbanization under the leadership of a government that articulates a modernist ideology. History as a discipline relies primarily on written records, and while such records (and the great variety of forms of writing in which they exist) already demonstrate considerable diversity in human modes of thought and existence, they necessarily omit part of that diversity. Insofar as the very existence of written records correlates with large-scale, state-organized societies, historical examinations of human diversity typically fail to capture the types of diversity that arose among humans living in small-scale, nonliterate societies.

In his work on sex, Laqueur shows that perspectives on the sexual body varied widely across two millennia of Western history, though two common themes—the one-sex model (women and men are basically the same and female sexual organs are simply inverted male organs) and two-sex model (female and male sexuality differ fundamentally)—interweave throughout (Laqueur 1990). He argues that the transition to modernity has been accompanied by the domination of the two-sex over the one-sex model and implies that human sexual experience is framed by the lenses through which sexuality is imagined. While I accept that humans everywhere experience and think about grief and sexual desire, I would not tie universality so closely to the treatment of mortal remains. Nor would I conclude that forms of thinking about the dead and of practical dealing with dead bodies are likely to be any more or less universal than forms of thinking about sexuality and sexual practice. Laqueur solidly demonstrates the types of diversity in Western thinking about the dead over the past two thousand years and frames modern transformations in the treatment of the dead in a compelling manner. But this diversity cannot represent the full range of human treatment of mortal remains.

NOTE

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