CLASSICS REVISITED

Robert Hertz: the social triumph over death

DOUGLAS J. DAVIES
University of Durham, Durham, United Kingdom

Contribution à une étude sur la représentation collective de la mort, 
Année Sociologique, 10, 1907, 48–137.

A contribution to the study of the collective representation of death,
In R. Hertz, Death and The Right Hand (trans. Rodney and Claudia Needham)
London: Cohen and West, 1960

Robert Hertz’s foundational contribution to the sociology of death is as strikingly fresh today as when first published in 1907 when Hertz, born in 1881 and killed in active service in 1915, was but 26 years old. It remained largely unknown to English speaking social science for some 50 years and increased in significance only after its English translation of 1960. It now stands as a basic historical and key theoretical reference point for sociological work on death. It appeared first in the Année Sociologique, a journal established to propagate the theoretical perspective of a small number of sociologists associated with Emile Durkheim, including Marcel Mauss, Henri Hubert and Hertz. They emphasised ‘collective representations’, i.e., patterns of ideas, values, beliefs and behavioural expectations that emerged from the interplay of many individuals over time and provided the distinctive domain of and for sociology. Because collective representations could not be reduced to any single emotion of individuals they could not be appropriately studied by psychology, only by sociology. This means that, while we may, quite legitimately, expect the Année scholars to refer to emotions, we will expect to find the emotions interpreted sociologically, in terms of collective representations, and not psychologically. In other words, they are interested in what the emotions mean to people within a social world and not what the emotions mean within the private domain of an individual self. The way sociological and psychological disciplines relate continues to be discussed to the present day.

Hertz focused on social values as they were grounded in the human body and, in a later generation, his work would have fallen under the broad category
of embodiment. His interests in the relation between bodily behaviour and social values can be assessed by the fact that the theme he chose to pursue for his doctoral studies was to have been that of sin and impurity. He had also entertained the thought of exploring either the symbolism of the right and left hands or a study of death. He did engage in a relatively brief yet significant study of the symbolism of laterality but was also pressed to complete some of his early thoughts on death, which then appeared as the essay considered in this paper. The very use of the phrase ‘représentation collective’ in Hertz’s French original locates his concern in the innovative Durkheimian technical vocabulary. While later sociologists might, for example, study roles, the Durkheimians focused on these value-invested patterns of ideas that constituted the distinctively social realm in which human beings participated. Durkheim had started to use this notion in his highly influential study *Suicide* published in 1897.

Hertz sets out on his study of death by moving from the biological body to the moral obligations that attend the treatment of the dead. The corpse is not only a biological entity but also a social one. Accordingly, the moral world, and not that of hygiene, comprises the appropriate mode of discourse for interpreting death rites. For Hertz, as for the *Année* group in general, the word ‘moral’ is practically synonymous with ‘social’, an important corrective for those used to thinking of the ‘moral’ more in terms of the specifically ‘ethical’ domain. Here, for the first time, we are presented with a well formed sociological and theoretical understanding of funerary rites. It does not follow the popular understanding of Hertz’s native France, where he sees everyone as familiar with death, and where it might also seem inappropriate even to seek to analyse death sociologically. Rather, his comparative study is both complementary and contradictory, using data drawn from far afield, especially from Indonesia. Hertz views funerary rites as a process consisting of ‘two complementary notions’: that death implies a lasting procedure and that it is a transition. Above all else society is concerned with itself and with its continuity through those constituent individuals who are, as it were, bearers of ‘society’. Here we encounter the idea of society as an abstract entity, one that critics of the *Année* group have often singled out as an over-reified concept. Hertz followed the Durkheimians in viewing society as a reality of its own, and speaks of society as though it had a mind of its own, even to the point, in this case, of affirming that “the collective consciousness does not believe in the necessity of death, so it refuses to consider it irrevocable”: the key feature is that “the last word must remain with life” (1960: 78). And that last word is spoken through the mortuary rites that change the status of a person from being a living member to being a departed member of society. Here there is a ‘release’ and a ‘reintegration’ interpreted through ‘a general type’ in which the state of the body and the identity of the dead are related (1960: 44). “Death is consummated only when decomposition has ended: only then does the deceased cease to belong to this world so as to enter another life” (1960: 47).

This type or model brings to sharp focus his prime ethnographic concern with cases of double-burial in which, first, the medium of the flesh is destroyed
Robert Hertz: the social triumph over death

before, secondly, the bones are subjected to final ritual processing. The first, or ‘wet’, stage removes the identity of the dead from its status held in life while the second, or ‘dry’, stage confers a new identity pertaining to the realm of the ancestors or some other state. Hertz describes a variety of means by which the first ‘burial’ takes place, whether this involves earth burial, storage in large pots until dissolution occurs, or even endo-cannibalism, in which kinsfolk eat the flesh of their own dead. Mummification and cremation are interpreted, theoretically, as the two extreme forms of funerary rites as far as time is concerned, the one a very slow and the other a markedly rapid means of coping with the immediate corpse. For Hertz, driven more by theoretical concerns than with the description of exotic activity, the means are quite subservient to the end of removing the physically embodied person from the social world of networked relationships.

The secondary rites served the focused purpose of according a new status to the dead and of changing the nature of the relationship between the dead and the living. The significance of the secondary funeral lay in closing “the dark period dominated by death” and opening “a new era” (1960: 56). This change was accompanied by a shift in attitude from “the element of repulsion and disgust” towards the corpse to a “feeling of reverent confidence”. By so “establishing a society for the dead, the society of the living regularly re-creates itself” (1960: 72). This theme of recreation or the regeneration of life is integral to Hertz’s analysis and would be developed by later generations of anthropologists such as Bloch and Parry (1982).

Writing just before Van Gennep published his now familiar thesis of rites of passage in 1909, Hertz speaks of funerary rites in a very similar way. These rites resemble initiation in that the dead, like the youth who is withdrawn from the society of women and children to be integrated into that of adult males, also change status. Poignantly, then, death resembles birth in transferring an individual from one domain to another. Both transitions confer a deep sense of renewal and are surrounded by mystical qualities attendant upon the dangers of status change. Hertz pinpoints these processes in the two complementary notions that death is not instantaneous but subject to events in time, and that death “is not a mere destruction but a transition” (1960: 48). It is precisely against this background that Hertz moves to interpret mourning as “the direct consequence in the living of the actual state of the dead” (1960: 51). In other words the perceived status and location of the dead is mirrored in the state of the living. Mourning is an ‘obligation’ from which the survivors are freed at the end of the final reburial ceremonies which, again, “close the dark period dominated by death, and open a new era” (1960: 56). A sense of repulsion towards the dead is replaced by “a feeling of reverent courage”.

Throughout, Hertz does not forget individuals, but treats them through a more sociological than psychological form of discourse. Still, he speaks of the “painful psychological process” of separating the dead from the consciousness of the living. Ties with the dead are not “severed in one day”, memories and images continue through a series of “internal partings” (1960: 81). The idea of
an intermediary realm for the dead is equated with the period of memory change for the living. Here there is a strong sociological discussion of what later psychologists would describe in terms of attachment and loss. Notably, Hertz defines death “as a social phenomenon” that “consists in a dual and painful process of mental disintegration and synthesis”. Throughout his essay the changes in social status and relationships match changes affecting individual members of society. But his emphasis upon the social consciousness means that its analysis is not reduced to psychology but is maintained in that middle range of analysis that typifies the Année group. There is also a strong sense of symbolic equivalence running throughout the essay as the destiny of the dead and the social experience of the survivors mirror each other. Such parallels are repeated for the tripartite section of the paper that deals with the body, the soul and the survivors. Just as the body is not instantly destroyed but undergoes a process of ritual, so too with beliefs about the soul and its various phases after death, and similarly with survivors, whose mourning matches the change in identity of the dead.

Throughout his study Hertz works on the assumption that “death destroys the social being grafted upon the physical individual” (1960: 77). This is a crucial focus of his sociological conviction that “society imparts its own character of permanence to the individuals who compose it: because it feels itself immortal and wants to be so, it cannot normally believe that its members, above all those in whom it incarnates itself, and with whom it identifies itself, should be fated to die” (1960: 77). “Thus when a man dies, society loses in him much more than a unit: it is stricken in the very principle of life, in the faith it has in itself” (1960: 78). This is why death can be viewed as a form of sacrilege, one involving a violence, energy or negative social force: something that is working against society. Hertz’s discussion of ritual impurity surrounding corpses and close kin of the dead is ably interpreted in terms of the negative forces that are antagonistic towards and destructive of society.

It is precisely death as a ritually impure phenomenon that is taken in hand through funerary rites. Death is, intrinsically, not natural. It does not belong to the realm of nature, as such, because it befalls human beings, and human beings are social beings. It is society that is touched, affronted and, in that sense, ‘contaminated’ by death. This helps explain the difficult concept of ritual purity that is very widely associated with death the world over. Impurity means or implies an affront to social order. Rites to restore ritual purity are rites that maintain order. This helps explain why, “natural death is not sufficient to sever the ties binding the dead to this world, in order to become an authentic inhabitant of the land of the dead he must first be killed … ritually killed and…born anew” (1960: 73). In other words, society must affirm the change of status and identity of the dead. Just as it is society that names and affirms new members so it must dismiss them. Ritual impurity is turned into ritual purity, danger into security, chaos into order. The last word must remain with life, so that, at whatever stage of religious evolution we place ourselves, “the notion of death is linked with that of resurrection: exclusion is always followed by a new integration” (1960: 79). Here the notion of the regenerative capacity of ritual is emphasized once more.
It is something that I have developed myself through the idiom of ‘words against death’ declared in the rhetoric of funeral rites (Davies, 1997).

For the collective consciousness, death is a temporary exclusion of the individual from human society. This exclusion effects their passage from the visible society of the living into the invisible society of the dead. Mourning, at its origin is the necessary participation of the living in the mortuary state of the relative and lasts as long as this state lasts. In the final analysis death as a social phenomenon consists in the dual and painful process of mental disintegration and synthesis. It is only when this process is completed that society, its peace recovered, can triumph over death (1960: 86).

Combining ethnographic description with theoretical analysis meant that Hertz could write coherently and integratedly about primary and secondary death rites, ritual impurity, fear of the dead and the performance of mourning, along with the power of emotion, of attachment and of loss. After his death and the death of Durkheim it fell to Marcel Mauss to publish Hertz’s work. This has been fully described by Robert Parkin, whose scholarly treatment of Hertz’s work affords the fullest source on the topic (1996). While perpetuated in France, Hertz’s work fell into relative oblivion in the English-speaking worlds of anthropology and sociology, as well as in the history and phenomenology of religion, including the relatively few studies of death that existed. When, for example, Hocart in 1935 wrote on the purpose of ritual as that which fostered life, he bemoaned the fact that theorists “have found every kind of reason for funerals except life” (1952: 49). Yet Hertz had done precisely that. Also in 1935 Rafael Karsten of Finland writes on funeral and mourning customs in his influential Origins of Religion but is able to bring no significant theoretical light to bear upon a broad classification of ritual behaviour (1935: 276ff). Even Geoffrey Gorer’s renowned Death, Grief and Mourning (1965: 130–132) only briefly alludes to sociological perspectives but without any treatment of Hertz.

The breakthrough came with Louis Dumont who tells, autobiographically, how Hertz had been forgotten even in Oxford, one of the leading centres of postwar social anthropology under Evans-Pritchard. He describes how he drew the latter’s attention to Hertz in a lecture on Mauss delivered in 1952 (1986: 225). Certainly Evans-Pritchard was subsequently influential in getting several key Année texts translated and published, including Death and the Right Hand, translated by Rodney and Claudia Needham and published in 1960. Parkin’s analysis of subsequent developments of Hertz’s thesis following the 1960 publication of its translation shows how “Hertz’s insights have been developed rather than discarded” (1996: 107ff., 121). Most sociological and anthropological studies of death published since the 1980s refer to Hertz’s sociological perspective. Mention must be made of the influential adaptation and implementation of Hertz by Metcalf and Huntington’s volume Celebrations of Death, first published in 1979 and revised in 1991, and of Bloch (1988) and Bloch and Parry’s Death and the Regeneration of Life (1982). I have, myself, applied Hertz’s theory of double burial to the contemporary practice of cremation in Britain where, for example, the cremation service deals with the ‘wet’ symbolic medium.
of the body while rites performed with the cremated remains reflect the ‘dry’ medium of the ashes. (1997: 30ff.). This scheme is, however, far from easy to relate to normal burial practices in contemporary Western societies, where the very idea of disturbing or removing remains in order to reuse graves in over-full cemeteries is problematic (Davies & Shaw, 1995: 38ff.).

Certainly, Hertz’s paper has proved to be a fertile source of perspectives upon the sociology of death, through its emphasis upon the regenerative power of mortuary ritual. His work also affords an early example of embodiment theory, a perspective that intimately associates bodily processes with social values. But the further one moves from the anthropologically interpretative realm of embodiment and of analyses of small-scale societies to the sociological views of culture, the less easy it is simply to employ Hertz’s scheme in any uniform way. This directly parallels the benefits and problems inherent in Van Gennep’s notion of rites of passage as applied to modern and complex societies and as reflected, for example, in Victor Turner’s expansion of liminality into the liminoid (1982: 20–60). The continued significance of Hertz’s essay lies in its potential for application in appropriate contexts and in the theoretical perspective it fosters upon the force of symbolism relating individual and social identity amidst the dynamics of cultural life.

REFERENCES


Biographical note

Douglas Davies is Professor in the study of Religion in the Department of Theology, Durham University. He is the author of various volumes, including Death, ritual and belief (1997). London: Cassell.