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ÉLISABETH ANSTETT

# Silent Stock

## On Clandestine Mass Graves and their Legacies

**Abstract:** Mass exhumations and the mass unearthing of dead bodies are quite new phenomena in the history of humankind. The 'forensic turn' has led various disciplines to pay renewed attention to the dead and not only to the death. For a couple of decades, social anthropologists have been urged to (re)consider the materiality of death. This return of the dead bodies *en masse* has consequently made them look carefully at the ways in which corpses are dealt with in various situations of disasters or mass crime, but also made them aware of the various silences and denial mechanisms lastingly surrounding mass graves and buried corpses. This afterword aims to reflect on the way these silences and denial have shaped our disciplinary field and maintained some of its blind spots.

**Keywords:** twentieth century, concealment, denial, exhumations, forensic turn, mass violence, memory, unleashing, waste

Over the last twenty years, a vast and globalised process of unearthing, which has only just begun and we are still a long way from completely understanding, has led to the opening of numerous clandestine mass graves and resurfacing of countless remains of victims of mass violence in Europe, Asia, Africa and Latin America, some of which were buried decades ago.<sup>1</sup> The reappearance of these hidden human remains across time raises many questions for the societies in question, as well as for the social anthropologists who study them, and leads me to conclude this special issue with a number of observations.

Apart from the great length of time that these victims' remains have remained clandestinely buried (half a century in the case of Latin American dictatorships (García et al 2010), eighty years in the case of the abuses of the Spanish Civil War (Ferrándiz 2013) and over a century in the case of the genocide committed against the Herero and Nama (Shigwedha 2018), another feature they share is the scale of the violence that led to these clandestine burials. In each case, mass crimes and lasting deadly discriminating processes took place that resulted in the killing or the slow death of thousands or even hundreds of thousands of people. We are therefore considering situations in which violence was perpetrated over the long term, on a large scale and across vast areas.

Thanks to the work of historians, we now know that there were always several stages to this violence. These included the initial military or police prepara-



tion for the massacres and the bureaucratic management of administering death, from the surveillance and identification of targets, to the arrangement of arrests, detentions, torture and (rapid or slow) deaths. This military and bureaucratic implementation of extreme violence has been well documented and studied: in Africa, for instance in the case of the genocide committed against the Tutsi (Mutwarasibo 2009); in Latin America, for example with the implementation of Operation Condor (Périès 2013); in Europe, in the cases of the Holocaust, the Gulag and the Franco regime among others (Feldman and Seibel 2004; Werth 2005; Ferrándiz 2006); and in Asia, in the case of Cambodia for instance (Kiernan and Vigne 1999).

The unleashing of violence has always involved simultaneous murders, whereby many people are killed together, at the same time, in the same place, by the same people and in the same way. In the overwhelming majority of cases, victims' remains have been treated disparagingly, handled as waste (Schmitt and Anstett 2019). To hide these 'concealed' or 'disposed of' corpses (Anstett and Dreyfus 2014), that is, to get rid of this 'waste', thousands of clandestine mass graves were created. These graves are strewn across the areas concerned, leaving a lasting mark on them (see the striking maps of mass grave locations in Spain, Bosnia, Poland, the Ottoman Empire and Cambodia, for example<sup>2</sup>).

Additionally, the concealment of crimes has always been accompanied by practices of revisionism (the production of counter-narratives), denial (the refusal to acknowledge the crimes committed) or silencing (where any discourse relating to such crimes is neutralised) in relation to the violence perpetrated. These practices sometimes remain effective for many decades (Behrens et al 2017), resulting in a lasting absence of court trials for the crimes committed (Bećirević 2010) and, more broadly speaking, difficulties in locating the mass graves and uncovering victims' remains. Each of the exhumation cases documented and studied in this special issue coordinated by Zahira Aragüete-Toribio has in this regard brought an end to significant periods of concealment or denial. Each of these cases shows how difficult and challenging coming to terms with denial might be.

Contextualisation work carried out by political scientists and anthropologists has enabled academics working on these issues to better understand the strictly political origins of the exhumations to which such past violence has ultimately given rise, as well as to document the complex 'forensic turn' that has gradually taken place over the past two decades (Anstett and Dreyfus 2015; Dziuban 2017; Rosenblatt 2015). We now know that the deliberate opening of a grave – as opposed to its chance or accidental opening – signifies the culmination of bitter power struggles between a wide range of stakeholders (Stepputat 2016; Ferrándiz and Robben 2015). Carolina Robledo Silvestre and Paola Alejandra Ramírez González's contribution to this issue thus highlights the tensions surrounding exhumations in Mexico, where the state's structural failure is offset by the activism of small local NGOs, while Astrid Jamar and Laura Major's critical and comparative approach to the exhumations carried out (or not carried out) in Burundi

and Rwanda reveals that domestic political issues can contradict humanitarian global matters, to the point of producing widely divergent methods for dealing with mass graves, the opening of which continues to be a burning issue many decades after the end of the violence.

Exhumations thus lead to an inevitable reclassification of unburied human remains: they rid them of their status as waste – bestowed on them by their murderers – and in most of the cases ensure that the humanity of the victims is acknowledged (Jugo and Wastell 2015). As a key step in a process of re-humanising victims, exhumations are now widely prescribed by transitional justice systems, for which they have rapidly become an essential tool (Rubin 2014). Identifying victims is always set as a goal, although forensic analyses are in many cases inconclusive and the exhumed remains stay anonymous (Parra et al 2020) or are stored sometimes lastingly in liminal spaces, as shown by Sarah Wagner for the case of the US Department of Defense or Astrid Jamar for the case of Burundi. Moreover, the light shed by María Fernanda Olarte-Sierra on the Colombian case underlines that situated and partial forensic knowledge is not exempt from power relationships; her article reveals that the final stage of returning the remains to families can also be accompanied by the reiteration of symbolic violence. In this regard, among the achievements of this special issue is highlighting how the exhumations, even if seen as a key and crucial point in the recovery process for societies, often end up in a missed opportunity.

Being the last major stages in the return of the ‘disappeared’, both the reburial of the victims and the remembrance of the events that led to their murder always give rise to large-scale collective mobilisation, sometimes of international scope (Dreyfus and Anstett 2016), to the point that the quest for a dignified burial has now become an essential motto of the NGO-staged resilience processes in societies scarred by extreme violence (Mukanoheli 2009; Robin Azevedo 2016). Up until now, the reburial stage of the forensic turn has attracted less scientific interest than the exhumation stage. However, following up a line of research opened twenty years ago by Katherine Verdery (1999) and recently renewed by Wagner (2019), anthropologists have now begun to turn their attention to the reburials, due to what these events can reveal about funerary patterns, as much as social, cultural or political aspects of the handling of remains.<sup>3</sup> In this special issue, Sarah Wagner’s study of the challenges surrounding the attempts to identify US soldiers who died during the Korean War thus shows that being able to put an end to these soldiers’ mere ‘disappearance’ and return their remains to their families continues to be an important internal political issue for the United States government, more than half a century after the end of the fighting.

But these renewed lines of research are not the only ones. Building on the classical ‘material culture’ approach developed by French archaeologist and social anthropologist André Leroi-Gourhan, the handling of the corpses of victims of mass violence can for now be considered as a single ‘operational chain’ (Valentin et al 2014), which starts with the killing and ends with a reburial. Archaeologists,

historians and social anthropologists interested in material culture have provided us with a good understanding of this chain's two end links, namely the production of violence at one end and the return to society of the victims remains' at the other. The pioneering research conducted for over a decade by members of the Bones Collective<sup>4</sup> at the University of Edinburgh has in this respect shown the extent to which the materiality of human remains is linked to their symbolic effectiveness and lasting agency all along this operational chain (Krmpotich et al 2010).

However, and in spite of all these gains, we still struggle to have a good grasp of how the middle of the chain is made up, that is, to understand how these long – at times very long – periods of silence are constructed, during which time the bodies are deprived of a proper burial, but where it would appear nothing happens. Or to put it differently, using the lexicon of the anthropology of memory, we still know very little about the time of oblivion, and about these powerful mechanisms of collective denial (Cohen 2001). As such, we have a limited understanding of how the period of denial connects with that of recollection and the return to society of what has long lain buried and hushed up (Legg 2011). The contributions gathered in this special issue enlighten how various societies have made their way through these denial processes but are still in many ways struggling with their legacies. Unearthed materiality is revealed to be highly problematic. It represents a very powerful source for counter narrative, able to raise as many unanswered and uneasy questions as forgotten memories, and is also able to shed light on long-silenced tensions.

Let's go a step further, then. The biologists studying the cellular mechanisms of obesity or those working in epigenetics have shown that both cells and the genome can form 'silent stock' – triglycerides inside adipocytes in one case (Aouadi et al 2013); genes not expressed as part of the genome in another (Tycko 2000). These stocks enable organisms to retain materials they do not immediately need to use for long periods of time – years in the case of adipocytes and centuries in the case of the genome. In both cases, intense stress or crises are what lead these stocks to be released – adipocytes to release triglycerides and silent genes to be expressed.

Is it therefore possible to consider the period of collective denial in terms of these same mechanisms? Could we venture to think of these clandestine remains and mass graves as social silent stocks, around which both mechanisms of collective memories and the practices that allow for extant information to be passed on are organised and (re)composed? Could these remains therefore be seen as silent stocks for funeral practices and deferred rituals?

When it comes to situations of mass violence, the time when the corpses are 'stored', that is, when they are buried or hidden, could then be considered a key moment for understanding the logics of denial. This clandestine storing is indeed an important stage in the funerary operational chain. Neither historians nor anthropologists know much about it at present, and it is reconstructed, as it

were, in negative relief, or by default, thanks in particular to the absolutely vital assistance that archaeologists now provide (Wright et al 2005). Archaeologists, forensic archaeologists in particular, are the experts in what is dug up and who have learned to read the material traces that have been buried, as 'disturbing' as these may be (Crossland and Joyce 2015).

The burying of bodies marks a pivotal stage in the history of mass violence, one that instantly and inherently connects two different levels of reality: a material level and a symbolic level. At the material level, the burying of corpses (as much as discarding or attempting to destroy them) certainly gives concrete expression to a desire to conceal, whereas at the symbolic level, this burying (which in some cases mimics or simulates a funeral) introduces another form of concealment: the silencing of the simultaneous death of a large number of individuals. From this stage onwards, passive collective denial but also active denial strategies may be implemented.

And yet, this crucial stage of burial and secret hiding has so far attracted little attention from social anthropologists. However, this storage stage is intrinsically linked to that of retrieval, and therefore to the time when the graves are opened. The moment when human remains are revealed and reappear marks the end of the storage stage for the bodies, thus confirming its relevance, or even its complete failure, if it comes to an end soon after the creation of the grave in question.

Thus far, many questions remain unanswered. Do the ways the bodies are stored (for instance, corpses abandoned in broad daylight by the roadside for everyone to see and know about, as was the case during the genocide committed against the Tutsi in 1994) relate to specific methods of denial or even impunity? Are some storage arrangements more lasting or effective than others (Jessee and Skinner 2005)? Is burial really the most efficient way of concealing crimes? The Armenian genocide (1.2 million people murdered between April 1915 and July 1916), where most of the victims' corpses were simply abandoned and were not concealed or buried (Ferlini and Croft 2009), along with other cases, such as the genocide committed by the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia (1.7 million people murdered between 1975 and 1979), where the bodies of the regime's victims were left to rot *en masse* in rice paddies and where cases of 'dug up' graves are the exception (Guillou 2015), appear to point to the contrary.

As such, an interesting dialectic in relation to burial emerges. This merits investigation, insofar as everything that is forcibly buried seems bound to resurface sooner or later. Indeed, it would appear that the more criminals invest in concealment, the less effective it turns out to be in the long term. This is true in the case of the Holocaust (Spector 1990), as well that of the genocide committed in Bosnia (Jugo and Wastell 2015), which gave rise to extremely elaborate (but ultimately futile) attempts to destroy or conceal traces, and eventually led to court trials. Likewise, Uruguayan archaeologists were able to demonstrate the existence of 'Operation Carrot', which sought to conceal the concealment by reopening unmarked graves in order to exhume the remains of victims of the

dictatorship and destroy them. While the operation effectively enabled the Uruguayan military to destroy the exhumed human remains, the Grupo de Investigación en Antropología Forense, led by Professor José López Mazz, was able to demonstrate that clandestine burial and clandestine exhumation had indeed taken place (López Mazz 2020), thus ratifying the failure of the desire to conceal.

All things considered, and building on the work presented in this special issue, a number of avenues for exploration have now opened up, offering productive research opportunities. On the one hand, there is a need to look at exhumations that have *not* taken place (in Latin America, Europe, Asia or Africa). Quite understandably, anthropologists have thus far focused their attention on places where things *have* been happening. But there are many places (Mexico, Spain, Cambodia, Turkey and Burundi) where exhumations remain the exception, and the absence of them remains the rule. This is the case, for instance, with the Gulag graves, or those from the period of the Great Purge, which are scattered across Russia and remain largely intact (Anstett 2014). So, what exactly happens where nothing is happening, such as in the Burundian case discussed in Astrid Jamar and Laura Major's contribution to this special issue? How do social relations, discourses and power relations interact with each other and how are they arranged to ensure that nothing happens? What do people know but keep quiet about? The work that remains to be done on the construction and perpetuation of denial is considerable and far from easy. For how can one capture and document absence, or lies and stonewalling? The epistemological and methodological questions that social anthropologists are faced with are in themselves exciting to consider. Understand these silent stocks will indeed require combining various epistemic resources or knowledge registers, and holding together what can be learnt through the study of materiality and what can be learnt through the study of emotions. Social anthropologists might thus choose the way of a collaborative and affective science, following a path opened by Carolina Robledo Silvestre and Paola Alejandra Ramírez González during the research they carried out in Mexico and presented in this issue, when researchers accept to be affected by the surrounding world in order to better understand the studied community and their field.

Considering the seminal moment of the clandestine burial is equally extremely important. We must, as far as possible, return to (and/or gather) the accounts of witnesses and actors involved in such concealment processes, so as to be able to give better voice to soil archives and human remains (which are other archives), in order to try to understand precisely how a mass grave came about and be in a position to assess its various impacts. For clandestinely burying and exhuming always occur in the same society; these transgressive events represent the two sides of the same coin. Once again, the epistemological and ethical challenges are significant, for social anthropologists will have to get as close as possible to the killing or evil at work (González-Ruibal and Moshenska 2014; Squires et al 2020), and engage with the darker side of modernity. Hopefully, the

recent development of the field of perpetrator studies<sup>5</sup> should provide the discipline with a particularly conducive framework for such line of research, enabling questions to be properly constructed and experiences to be shared. Here too, social anthropologists will have to accept to be affected. These paths, however, will require time.

In a speech delivered in April 2014 on the French state's denial of its responsibility for crimes of genocide committed in Rwanda in 1994, the controversial but also sharp politician, President Paul Kagame, stressed that 'No country is powerful enough – even when they think they are – to change the facts . . . Facts are stubborn.' And it would seem that facts, especially material facts, related to mass violence are indeed stubborn. What research on exhumations conducted by social anthropologists over the last twenty years has made clear is that when it comes to mass violence, total amnesia does not exist. Many investigations attest to the power of revisionism, or the vitality of denial, but these investigations also give clear evidence that something is often resisting. And it certainly seems that this 'something', this 'silent stock', is capable of holding firm for a very long time. For if palaeontologists when studying very old bones are able to establish the diet and health of humans who died 2.8 million years ago, then establishing what happened some 80 or 120 years ago to victims of mass crime should ultimately be no cause for concern. Time shouldn't be seen as an obstacle to unearthing the artefacts, unravelling denial, and ultimately recovering long-silenced facts. For these facts are stubborn, and time is on our side.

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## Notes

1. This text was revised in July 2021, at a time when the Canadian media report almost weekly about the discovery of hundreds of unmarked graves of autochthonous communities' children, victims of colonialist policies of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. It was copy edited in June 2022, at a time when the international media report about the discovery of mass graves following up the invasion of Ukraine by the Russian Federation.
2. For the locations of mass graves in Spain, see: <https://www.mpr.gob.es/memoriademocratica/mapa-de-fosas/Paginas/buscadormapafosas.aspx> (Accessed June 2022); for those in Bosnia and Herzegovina, see: <http://www.osaarchivum.org/press-room/announcements/Map-Mass-Grave-Exhumations-Bosnia-and-Herzegovina-Published> (Accessed June 2022); and for maps of the killing sites in Cambodia, see: <https://gsp.yale.edu/satellite-maps-mass-grave-and-prison-sites-1975-1979> (Accessed June 2022).
3. See the Transfunéraire research programme (<https://funeraire.hypotheses.org/> Accessed June 2022) launched in 2020. It applies a comparative approach to the study of collective reburial rituals taking place in post-mass violence contexts, in Europe and Latin America.
4. See: <https://www.sps.ed.ac.uk/research/research-project/bones-collective> (Accessed June 2022).
5. This led to the establishment of the Perpetrator Studies Network and the creation of the *Journal of Perpetrator Research*. See: <https://perpetratorstudies.sites.uu.nl/journal-of-perpetrator-research/> (Accessed June 2022).

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## Stock silencieux: Sur les fosses communes clandestines et leurs héritages

Les exhumations et la mise au jour massives de cadavres sont des phénomènes plutôt nouveaux dans l'histoire de l'humanité. Le tournant médico-légal a conduit diverses disciplines à accorder une attention renouvelée aux morts et pas seulement à la mort. Pour leur part, les anthropologues sociaux ont été incités depuis quelques décennies à (re)considérer la matérialité de la mort. Ce retour en masse des cadavres les a, par conséquent, amenés à se pencher sur la manière dont les cadavres sont traités dans des situations de catastrophes ou de crimes de masse, mais aussi à prendre conscience des divers silences et mécanismes de déni qui entourent durablement les fosses communes et les cadavres enterrés. Cette postface vise à réfléchir à la manière dont ces silences et ces dénis ont façonné notre champ disciplinaire et maintenu certains de ses angles morts.

**Mots-clés:** XXe siècle, déchaînement, déni, dissimulation, exhumations, déchets, mémoire, tournant médico-légal, violence de masse