
CALL FOR PAPERS

International Seminar

4th-6th of November 2015, Marseille

MATERIAL TRACES OF MASS DEATH

THE EXHUMED OBJECT

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Partners :

UMR 7268 - Biocultural Anthropology, Law, Ethics, Health

LABEX ENHE - Writing a New History of Europe

UMR 7366 - Georges Chevrier Centre

UMR 8138 - IRICE - Identities, International Relations and Civilizations of Europe

Interdepartmental Archaeology Pole of Rhin

Argumentation

« *A boot is more human than a bone*¹ »

The practice of burying corpses is rooted in the long history of mass violence, whether it has occurred within the context of military confrontation, genocides or political repression. The exhumation, on the other hand, seems to fit into a dynamic proper to a 20th century affected by extreme violence of an unprecedented scale, and marked by the flourishing figure of victimhood. The development of funerary archaeology, the progress of forensic medicine which allows the identification of the corpses' DNA years after the death, associated with the increasing interest of our societies for the past and its memory as well as the thirst for justice and memorial rehabilitation of the victims, have contributed to the development of the quest for bodies buried hastily in extreme circumstances around the world. Material traces of the massacre, these mass graves and the remains they contain, are certainly a tool available for studies but also for the families, the justice system, the States in order to establish a truth which was unknown, forgotten, repressed or denied. One can guess: the motivations of each and everyone do not necessarily match and the associated conflicts (whether they are symbolic, political, property-related or diplomatic) reach the level of awareness to the past of societies who's history was raised by these traces.

Within the context of a historiography and of practices in renewal, our multidisciplinary team (archaeologists, historians, anthropologists) wishes to pursue its reflections on a particular dimension of these material traces of mass deaths. In fact, if the mass graves shelter human residues of the victims, they also contain various objects, which equally challenge professionals of exhumations, researchers or relatives of the victims. Too often left aside (except by archaeologists), being considered appendices of skeletal left overs, these objects aren't only rich in information, but they are also carriers of emotions and multiple interrogations. It is to these objects, signifying per se, their function in the practice of exhumation and their uses posterior to the practices of reburial and maintenance of memory, which this seminar is devoted.

Papers may focus in a non-exhaustive manner on the following themes:

¹ Testimony of a leader of the Asociacion para la Recuperacion de la Memoria Historica quoted by Layla RENSHAW, *Exhuming Loss. Memory, Materiality and Mass Graves of the Spanish Civil War*, Lest Coast Press, Walnut Creek, California, 2011, p. 159..

1 THE OBJECT AS A SOURCE:

The object in a mass graves is a major carrier of knowledge: it represents one of the fundamental elements of expertise, anthropological treatment and scientific data.

Identification: the object, (nameplates, accessories and leftover clothes, jewelry, personal objects, equipment, etc.) associated with documents from archives, testimonies of survivors, archaeological and anthropological observations, even genetic testing, can be a key element in the identification of the corpses.

Writing the history of the massacre and its victims: the object provides information on the conditions of individual and collective death, on the moment of passing (for example watches stopped at the same time in Bosnia), on the targeted group (military or civilians), on the nature of the violence suffered (arms and projectiles). It also helps to address a possible sexual dimension of the violence. For a long time the objects also contributed in determining the sex of victims, often with mistakes due to the importance of the gender stereotype influencing the researcher. A weapon presupposed a man and a jewel a woman. In reality, the analysis of objects is a lot more complex, if it is one of the elements of identification of the sex of the victim, they also shed light on the relations of gender during wartime.

It administers precious information regarding the victim, on his/her socioeconomic condition (clothes, shoes, jewelry, objects linked to the profession), beliefs/superstitions (symbols and religious objects, good luck charms), habits (objects linked to tobacco, writing, hygiene, health, games), cultural practices (linked to ethnicity or to a geographical group) health status (diseases, handicaps, etc.), and lifestyle. The texts (letters, notebooks, etc.) and graffiti present on certain objects also inform us of the state of mind of the victim and on his/her jailers/executioners. Thus the object can reveal unknown practices, such as the numerous daily adaptations to conflict (recuperation, modification and misappropriation of objects as a solution to their needs and shortages). Which historical information can be drawn from the study of the object itself, the study of the context of burial and of individual identification of the

associated corpse? Certain fundamental scientific studies can equally be applied to this corpus of exhumed objects (study of degradation of materials, etc.).

The absence of an object is just as significant as its presence. The analysis of the categories of recovered objects (thus absent from the graves) testify to the practices of the despoliation and recuperation of objects, before and after the death of the victims, often orchestrated by the gravediggers and/or the executioner themselves to feed their mercantile interests (jewellery and precious objects) or to hinder any further identification.

Prove: the object contributes as well to the establishing of a narrative of a historical event which in the case of a very recent past, can in some instances corroborate a judicial procedure; it becomes evidence. In other cases, on the contrary, the object can be misused in the context of the creation of a myth or to illustrate revisionist theories.

This first dimension of found objects will lead us to the interrogation on the protocols of identification and their evolution through the 20th century, on the work of the experts and the obstacles they encounter (stereotypes to overcome, falsifications by jailers as for example in Katyn, successive reinventions, etc.).

2) THE OBJECT AS A SIGN

Material traces of the massacre, which constitute the object, is a sign as well. It refers to the human being whom possessed it as a sort of metonymy and therefore disposes of a stronger evocative power. Thus the objects find themselves in the centre of the museum's representations of mass violence.

Personification: Where does the evocative and emotional power of the object originate? The exhumed object supposes a brutal irruption in the intimacy of a life, of an individuated life which re-emerges. The banality of a razor, a wedding ring, or glasses make biographical fragments appear, which then give life to the human rests. And the insertion of this banality in the everyday life contributes to the understanding of the emergence of the drama, the tragedy and the unheard of. To what point does the emotional power of the material traces modify the relationship between the researcher and his object? Which connections do the families of the victims maintain with these objects: is it private or public heritage? What relations does the local

population, residing nowadays near these graves, entertain with the fortuitous discovery of objects found in the mass graves (during ploughing, during work, etc.)?

Becoming: What does the object become after being exhumed and analyzed? This question includes a legal and ethical dimension, as for all human remains: to whom do they belong? Must they be returned? If yes, to whom? According to which procedure? Here conflicts arise between the different categories of actors who intervene in the process of exhumation and whose interests diverge: families of the victims, associations, experts and practitioners of exhumation, administrative and judiciary authorities (archaeology, justice, army, veterans, etc.), political actors, media... Does the object return to the intimate sphere, which it never should have left or does it belong to the collective heritage by being bound to be conserved by society and be eventually publicly exposed? Certain legislations come in contradiction: archaeological and patrimonial, judiciary, military and veterans. Certain practices are embedded in centenary and non-regulatory traditions. It will be necessary to put them in evidence and to demonstrate the benefit of multidisciplinary approaches.

Exposition: From the emotion it elicits, and by its evocative power of the missing person, the object is in fact, the pray of all lusts. It even becomes the central part of the maintenance of memory, in the frozen remembrance in certain museums, of temporary expositions, like a monumental ornament, or reused during remembrance ceremonies. What are the different social and memorial usages of the object? What is the place, or the occultation, of the object in the memorial practices posterior to the exhumations? Are the objects presented associated to the name of the victims by the presentation of the museum?

RECOMMENDATIONS

Our conference will firstly address mass death provoked by men. In these conditions, it seems preferable to exclude deaths due to pandemic, unless it is within the context of armed conflict or sites or repression (for example places of internment).

Without prejudice of a prior time-frame, the conference aims to make researchers of different disciplinary horizons meet, from history to medicine, to archaeology, law, sociology or anthropology. We will thus appreciate papers concerning remote territories, just as those which take into account the gendered, ethic or legal dimension of the question.

SUBMISSION OF THE PROPOSALS

The paper proposals, of approximately **300 words**, written in **French** or in **English**, accompanied by a brief CV (1 page maximum), must be sent before the 12th January 2015 to the following address ([objetsfosses\[at\]gmail.com](mailto:objetsfosses[at]gmail.com)).

The organizers of the conference will take care of accommodation and meals of the participants for the duration of the event. Please let it be known if you need a partial funding of your transport cost. The budget, which is limited for the event, cannot permit a generalised coverage of the expenses.

[Translation : Beatrice Giribaldi Groak]