Death Interrupted: Contemporary Economies of Death and Dying

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In his novel *Death with Interruptions* José Saramago describes a country thrown into havoc after its people stop dying. This inexplicable occurrence — later cryptically defined as an “endurance test” — leads to the collapse of industries, social institutions, family ties, and religious doctrines. The country’s healthcare system strains to treat a growing population of people living in the purgatory of eternal severe illness; the life-insurance and funeral industries experience the demise of their raison d’être; families collapse under the burden of caring for their immortal elderly; and the Church reconsiders its position regarding resurrection. The workings of death in society are exposed when death disappears: death is the most definite demarcator of human life and as such it serves as an Archimedean point for myriad social, political, and economic institutions. Immortality destabilizes existing socio-economic orders and renders their most basic premises defunct (Saramago, 2008).

This saga references a key twentieth century development: with the advent of medical technologies and increasing life expectancy, death has indeed been interrupted (see Riley, 1983). But unlike in Saramago’s imaginary country, the interruption does not derive from a mysterious exogenous shock, but rather from socio-economic patterns that are endogenous to modernity. The interruption also results from the modern medical endeavour – driven by a combination of professional interests, moral motivations, and financial stakes — to avoid death and extend life as long as possible. Beyond analyzing patterns of production, consumption, and exchange, the economic sociology of death’s interruption cuts through the most fundamental existential notions of social and moral life. It illuminates how symbolic meanings of death play out in markets and policymaking, how corporate actors reconcile these meanings with profit making, and how policymakers tackle death’s symbolism when formulating and promoting their agendas.

Death, Morality, and Intergenerational Economics

One set of questions pertaining to the economics of death arises from the ubiquitous warnings of pension fund insolvency and of the future bankruptcy of welfare and healthcare systems. Actuarial evaluations often identify longevity as an impending fiscal problem; people’s timely demise has become a condition for economic sustainability (for example, Dang et al., 2001). This problem is often tackled from a purely actuarial standpoint, by postponing retirement and increasing contributions to pension and social security. Such reforms in labor contracts and welfare entitlements, however, are significant not only because of their fiscal importance, but also because they enact intergenerational moral relations.

Durkheim characterized the social organization of death as a moral order, made up of ties between the living and the dead, connections between individuals and groups, and a shared collective consciousness of death and the practices surrounding it (Durkheim, 1995: 242–275, 392–406). Actuarial adjustments in pensions and social security reshape such moral orders. By redefining intergenerational economic relations, these adjustments conceive new moral commitments between the young, the old, the soon-to-die, and the still unborn. “Social security [and public healthcare expenses] must be curbed. […] The growing debt burden threatens to crush the next generations of Americans,” warn fiscal conservatives who seek to eliminate the social safety net purportedly for the sake of future generations (Canada et al., 2013).

The moral relationship between the living and the dead also underlies markets that pertain to death. In her study of the early U.S. life-insurance industry, Zelizer (1979) documents the initial cultural reluctance to put a monetary price on human life. What made life insurance morally legitimate (and thus viable) was the industry’s success in framing it as a moral commitment between policyholders and their descendants. The nature of this commitment has changed since those days. Around the 1990s, many life insurance policyholders began selling their benefits to third parties in return for cash prior to their death. As Sarah Quinn (2008) observes, these transactions (“viaticals”) violated the original moral foundations of the life insurance market: instead of committing one’s benefits to one’s
Any economic sociology of death should take into account death’s symbolic weight. In his monumental work on the cultural history of death, Ariès identified an unprecedented breaking point in Western attitudes toward death: starting in the early twentieth century, death all but disappeared from day-to-day life. Dying was transformed from a normal social event that engaged numerous community members and centered on the dying, into an obscure clinical event, which doctors orchestrate technically in the secluded space of the modern hospital (Ariès, 1983). The modern art of dying involved sublimated mourning practices, heroic medical interventions, and overall mechanization of dying processes, which redefined the emotional experience and symbolic meaning of death (cf. Timmermans, 1999; Seale, 1998). Contemporary economies of death are embedded in these developments.

The elementary components of market life – commodities, prices, and profit-seeking behaviour – often attract moral criticism when they are manifested in proximity to death. As Trompette (2007) puts it, the limits found in death-related markets have much to do with a social taboo against the very idea of such markets. Economic exchange near death tends to involve many non-market features, such as gifts and donations, which distinguish it from other, more profane economic activities. This is, for example, the case in the exchange of human cadavers (Anteby, 2010), as well as in the organ transplant economy (Healy, 2006). In both cases, buying and selling commodities for money is broadly defined as morally corrupt, shoddy, and illegal: kidneys can be bought and sold for money only in the black market (cf. Scheper-Hughes, 2000), and exchange in cadavers for medical research takes place within strict boundaries that distinguish between legitimate and illegitimate exchange (Anteby, 2010).

Valuation practices in death-related markets are also embedded in death’s symbolic value. Mitford’s (1963; revised edition 1998) scathing critique of the U.S. funeral industry shows how the romanticism of death in the U.S. has made it possible for funeral homes to charge any amount of money for even the most basic products and services – coffin transport, flower arrangements, and receptacles. The incommensurability between the symbolic and emotional meaning of death and monetary value resulted in virtually unrestricted monetary spending and a profitable funeral industry that feeds off it.

**Economic Life and the Morbid Mystique**

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**Death and Economic Rationality**

Life’s pricelessness is a defining feature of economic activities surrounding death. Nevertheless, the monetary valuation of life has become a common professional tool in myriad areas over recent decades. Civil courts, for example, rule on monetary compensation for negligent death cases, and environmental regulators decide on the proper balance between economic growth and population exposure to environmental hazards. In both cases, the monetization of life has attracted much resistance: points at which rational methods meet the sacrosanct are usually sites of tense moral negotiations (see Viscusi, 2009; Carruthers, 2009; Fourcade, 2009). From one moral standpoint, the rational valuation of life pushes restitutive law ad absurdum: it condones killing as long as sufficient compensation is paid, or sufficient economic growth is attained. On the other hand, valuating life monetarily may guarantee some acknowledgement of damages suffered and make policymakers and entrepreneurs take this suffering into account (Espeland/Stevens, 1998). Recognizing life’s value is thereby done by assigning it a price.

In the realm of healthcare, the moral question of how to price life has been particularly prominent. End-of-life care, where death is most present, poses serious moral-economic challenges. Modern medicine offers myriad clinical interventions that can prolong life in some way or another almost regardless of the severity of the illness. “Mor-
tality itself,” as Timmermans observed, “cannot be avoid-
ed, but individual causes of death can be determined, and
then manipulated and postponed” (2006: 11). Thus, when
a first line of chemotherapy fails, oncologists can offer
second, third, and even fourth lines. When patients’ kid-
neys fail, nephrologists can treat them with dialysis for
years, and surgeons can offer them transplants. When
patients stop breathing, physicians can connect them to a
respirator. And when the heart stops, doctors can attempt
resuscitation. Dying, in other words, often involves deci-

dion-making: for a person to die, active decisions are made
not to conduct these procedures (Agamben, 1998; Calla-
han, 1987; Zussman, 1993). This plethora of interventions
is extremely expensive, and given the pricelessness of life,
it raises the specter of unsustainable spending (Ubel, 2000).

The field of Health Economics has gained much influence
in policymaking in tandem with the increased availability of
these medical interventions. In the United Kingdom, the
Quality-Adjusted Life Years (QALY) metric has standardized
the benefit of medical treatment and rationalized resource
allocation (Ashmore et al. 1989); today, with several excep-
tions, the UK’s National Health Service agrees to pay
20,000–30,000 British pounds for one standardized life
year. This rational care-rationing mechanism has been
criticized from various standpoints, but the imperative to
ration care in some way or another remains, and
healthcare systems necessarily address it, implicitly if not
explicitly. How much to spend on prolonging the lives of
severely ill patients has become an economic as well as a
moral question, even in the U.S. healthcare economy,
where no central mechanism for care rationing is applied
(Callahan, 1987; Livne, 2014).

All of these distinctive fields of inquiry illustrate how cen-
tral economics is to the modern art of dying. Death’s inter-
ruption has strained societies’ fiscal capacity to provide for
their members whose mortality is suspended. Markets
related to death have expanded and prompted complex
negotiations over those markets’ very legitimacy. Death
therefore poses micro- as well as macro-economic quan-
da ries, and we can see how adjustments made to address
these quandaries are enmeshed in morality. These adjust-
ments are important building blocks of contemporary
economies of death and dying.

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investigates ethnographically the intersection between eco-

nomic and moral considerations in decisions to withdraw,
forgo, or maintain life-prolonging care in U.S. hospitals.

Endnotes

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A History of the French Funeral Market

By Pascale Trompette

How did the market come to be a solution for delegating the responsibilities of a public utility such as funerals, especially in the French institutional context with its traditional preference for public control? How did a large national funeral company (PFG – Pompes Funèbres Générales) emerge as an extremely precursory, powerful industrial concentration at the beginning of the twentieth century, something unheard of in most industrial societies? Such enigmas piqued my interest and gave me a desire to go back through the history of the French funeral market, from the market formation stage, which followed the first national Napoleonic law, until liberalization in 1993, and more recently, following the entrance of insurance companies, the financialization of the market.

In the course of this historical investigation, the funeral market became a laboratory in which economic sociology could be used to explore the social mechanisms of change in markets. It was a “small” market (a stable group of around 2,500 companies, national frontiers, limited area of work), with a closed professional community in constant relations with the state and public representatives, very innovative in re-inventing its rules via political controversies, which were particularly impassioned due to the significance of the “culte des morts” in France. Narratives and testimonies, which took many different forms (newspaper articles, parliamentary debates, pamphlets or even literary descriptions), were numerous, as questions of morality and merchant legitimacy were called into question.

Paradoxically, although the institutional dimension has great resonance in this market, I progressively moved away from an institutional perspective when seeking to make sense of the mainsprings of market change, whether in terms of cultural values and legitimacy (Zelizer 1978; 1985), political institutions (Dobbin 1994), or legal framework and state intervention (Fligstein 2001). Obviously, all these factors have played an important role in the history of this market. But they also concealed an “infra” regime of historicity, belonging to the market itself and its ordinary competition. The constant renegotiation of public control by the inventive practices of undertakers (Trompette 2012), the increasing commodification of funeral goods through growing competition and the struggle to appropriate strategic resources via social networks within local markets have been driving forces of market formation and regulatory changes over time.

My approach is rooted in pragmatist theoretical approaches, such as Chicago School interactionism (Glaser and Strauss 1966; Star 1999) and ANT (Caliskan and Callon 2010; Callon and Muniesa 2003; Hardie and MacKenzie 2007). It provides fertile ground for the sociology of markets, moving the focus from structural elements to the organizational process (for example, organizing funerals), the question of coordination between heterogeneous worlds (for example, hospital and funeral home), the conventional and the material dimensions of market agencement (for example, equipment as market infrastructure). Based on an understanding of these day-to-day market practices, attention can be given to the dynamic process of framing/overflowing in calculative activities and competitive interactions (Czarniawska and Lofgren 2012).

I will illustrate my point by referring briefly to three examples from my research. The first concerns the ethnography
of price-setting and valuation through history (Trompette 2013). In various historical and institutional contexts, the state and public representatives have attempted to build a moral economy of funerals by setting up price and valuation formulae in the public domain, such as the free burial of the poor (nineteenth century) or the free post-mortem management of care for the deceased, compensating for public health establishment deficiencies (1960s). Throughout the nineteenth century, analysis of the inventive manipulations of price formulas by undertakers shows how their tactics and commercial tricks led to the slow degradation of the calculation formula over time, which threatened the ability to respond to public problems such as the right of free service offered to the destitute, who represented a sizeable proportion of burials. A century later, in the context of the intensive development of funeral homes by the leader PFG, the free services of funeral homes also benefited from a confusion of public-private facilities, helping its subsidiary company to build up a privileged position in the local funeral market, which relied on the close integration of facilities (hospital/funery/undertakers) and “confluence” effects in the circulation of the dead (Trompette 2007).

A second strand of my research addresses the moral controversy of the funeral market. Throughout its history, a degree of moral condemnation has hovered over French undertakers, the pompes funèbres, suspected of exploiting the misfortunes of bereaved families. A classic institutional approach to moral criticism would point to the funeral as a “contested commodity.” Following what Antebay (2010) describes as a “practice-based view of moral markets,” I suggest alternatively to consider the features of the “merchant” and the way in which he or she constructs, in a given market, a regime of moral/immoral practices. Throughout the history of the funeral market until the present, narratives produced very virulent pictures of the death market through their pen-portraits of undertakers as “crafty merchants.” Undertakers produced their own criticisms by denouncing their competitors as opportunist operators, taking advantage of defective institutional controls to indulge in various forms of malpractice, poaching, and exploiting customer fragility to increase their profits. I suggest that these professional “anti-myths” played a determining role in the moral controversy of this market.

A third aspect of my research addresses the political market regulation through the relationship between funeral companies and the state, especially during the main legislative upheavals affecting the organisation of funeral services (1804, 1904, 1993). I show that, even when external institutional forces have determined the legislative agenda (such as the French Revolution at the beginning of the nineteenth century or the whole debate on secularism [laïcité] in 1905), the funeral companies have always been a driving force in organizing the legal framework of the trade. The political skills of the dominant market players have supported their ability to define and renew the basis of political exchanges through which the state has delegated responsibility for funeral services (Trompette 2011). The collective action launched by small operators against the monopoly at the end of the 1980s cleared the way for the liberalization of this market. Moreover, whatever or wherever the scene, the co-regulation of the market was constantly played out through market dynamics and via the state’s “ex-post” attempts to manage inappropriate market imbalances, to curb private interests over against public utility and to channel the overflow of competitive practices.

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