The Socialist Movement and the History of Western Death Culture

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The subject of 'death and socialism' has recently received attention from several sides. In september 1997 a congress took place in Linz, Austria, under the name of *Rituals, Myths and Symbols: The Labour Movement In Between Religion and Popular Culture*. One of the contributions there was presented by Paul Pasteur, a French historian, who introduced the subject *Le mouvement ouvrier et la mort*[1]. Pasteur did not choose the most obvious subject, and the lack of studies on the topic forced him into pioneering efforts. The contribution was being noticed though. Less than a year later, in July 1998, a proposal could be read on the discussion lists H-Labor and Labnet, launched by an English researcher, Mike Haynes, who wondered 'if anyone had ever tried to count and measure incidents of deaths, violence and imprisonment' in Labour history[2]. The idea would be to create a 'repression index' that would allow to compare numbers of deaths and inprisonments in the course of the labour movement history. Just a few months later the issue was raised again, this time at the IALHI-congress in Milan in september 1998. It was decided to look into the setting up of a project, that would deal with the creation of an inventory of socialist funeral and other monuments. It was this decision that led to the present meeting.

Massacre, Martyrs and the Afterlife: Views on Red & Dead

This short survey shows no less than three different visions on the topic of 'death and socialism'. The first vision focuses on the violence that occurred in the course of the socialist struggle, the casualities and the bloodshed to come out of it, in other words the human price that has been paid to bring socialism into existence. As I consider this issue to be a spin-off of the general political history of the socialist movement, rather than an issue of its own, I will not deal with it in this contribution. A second vision deals with

[1] Paul Pasteur, 'Le mouvement ouvrier et la mort', *Rituals, Myths and Symbols: The Labour Movement In Between Religion and Popular Culture: 33th Linz Conference of the Internationale Tagung der Historikerinnen und Historiker der Arbeiterinnen- und Arbeiterbewegung*, Linz, unpublished lecture report, 1997, 18 p.

[2] How does one refer to an electronically published document? To consult the documents one might turn to the archives of the Labnet List, which is moderated by the International Institute of Social History (IISG) in Amsterdam. The original message was launched on the Labnet List on 8 Juli 1998.

an analysis of death culture and the socialist movement, and raises such questions as 'is there such a thing as a socialist death culture' or 'what role has the socialist movement played in the transformations of Western death culture'. A third vision finally aims at creating an inventory of socialist monuments, including funeral monuments, in order to remind the socialist movement of some of its most tragic and/or glorious moments, and to bring the historical and artistic value of these monuments into the attention of the public in general. These last two visions seem to be intertwined. Surely one cannot study death culture without turning to funeral monuments, and vice versa funeral monuments can not be fully understood without knowledge of such a thing as death culture. And not just funeral monuments, commemoration monuments too have almost always some kind of relation to dead persons or deadly incidents. However, there appears to be a logical ranking order between the two. It would seem advisable to study death culture first, in order to deal with inventarisation in a well grounded way.

'Death' itself is a not an innocent word, and the expression 'the dead' is even less so. Death is a negative concept, referring to the absense of life, in other words to something which is no longer there. We use the word in our daily language, while from a strictly scientific point of view we should be speaking of 'the finiteness of life'. Even worse is the expression 'the dead', as in 'the living and the dead'. Is there something like 'a dead person'? Can we still consider somebody whose life has ended to be a person? In order to do so, we must presume that there is 'something' afterwards, some kind of afterlife that will allow deceased people to maintain some kind of existence. In fact we do not know this, that is we have no scientifically reliable knowledge of the existence of an afterlife. Therefore we should not speak of 'the dead', but rather of 'people's bodily remains'.

Of all the great moments in a human being's lifespan, death is the most profound, as it ends this lifespan, destroys life itself, and probably puts an end to the existence of the individual. As Norbert Elias has pointed out, the human being is the only creature alive that is conscient of the fact that its life will one day come to an ending[3]. This cannot otherwise but provoke a chronic and deepseated state of fear, a kind of 'existential fever' that each person is confronted with. As this result of our state of consciousness—this trick that our conscience is playing us—is problematic to deal with, and as all individuals are sharing this same problem, societies throughout history have tried to provide collective answers to its members' fear of death. In doing so, they have created ideas and practices concerning the ending of lives and the disposal of bodily remains. The whole of this we call 'death culture'.

A death culture is always a combination of ideas and practices. On the idea-side the challenge is to provide an answer to the individual's fear of the ending of life. Most common answers are those claiming that there is an 'after-

[3] Norbert Elias, *Über die Einsamkeit der Sterbenden in unseren Tagen*, 1980, chapter 1.

life', a state of being in which the existence of the individual is prolonged beyond the moment of death. On the practices-side the first problem is to dispose of the fastly decaying bodily remains. The most common answer to this is the organizing of a 'funeral'. A funeral consists of a number of ceremonies surrounding the burial or cremation of a person's bodily remains. Furthermore the feelings of those who stay behind are to be reckoned with, feelings like grief and often the need to commemorate the person gone by. The most common answer to this is the institution of a number of mourning rituals. Avner Ben-Amos has put it like this:

> En général un enterrement est un rite de passage d'ordre privé au cours duquel la famille, les amis, les proches et parfois une autorité religieuse accompagnent le défunt dans sa dernière demeure et accomplissent un rituel destiné à assurer la paix à l'âme du mort dans l'au-delà et la tranquillité d'esprit aux survivants ici-bas.[4]

As societies have been evolving through time, so have death cultures. Since the Second World War a number of researchers have engaged in exploring Western death culture and its history.

The History of Western Death Culture

The first scientists after the Second World War to deal with death and death culture were not historians, but sociologists. A breakthrough was the publication in 1955 of an article by Geoffrey Gorer, an English sociologist, bearing the rather provocative title *The Pornography of Death*[5]. Gorer looked upon the attitudes towards sexuality and death from a psychological point of view, comparing between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. His conclusion was, briefly summarized, that in the nineteenth century people talked a lot about death while on sexuality there was a taboo, while in the twentieth century the opposite is true: people talk a lot about sex, yet now there is a taboo on death. Just like the taboo on sexuality in the nineteenth century gave way to the coming into existence of a lewd literature—the so-called pornography—so the twentieth century saw the rise of a literature of-

[4] Ben-Amos Avner, 'Les funerailles de gauche sous la IIIe République: deuil et contestation', Alain Corbin (e.a.) (eds.), *Les usages politiques des fêtes aux XIX°-XX° siècles*, Paris, Publications de la Sorbonne, 1994, p. 199.

[5] Geoffrey Gorer, 'The Pornography of Death', *Encounter*, iii, 1955, p. 51-58; republished in Geoffrey Gorer, *Death, Grief and Mourning in Contemporary Britain*, Londen, Cresset Press, 1965, viii-184 p. Other sociological works on death culture include: Jacques Choron, *Death and Western Thought*, New York, Macmillan, 1963, 320 p.; Alois Hahn, *Einstellungen zum Tod und ihre soziale Bedingtheit: Eine soziologische Untersuchung*, Stuttgart, Enke, 1968, viii-162 p.; Jean Baudrillard, *L'échange symbolique et la mort*, Paris, Gallimard, 1976, 347 p.; Daniel Vidal, 'L'article de la mort', *Sociologie du travail*, xix, 1977, nr. 3, p. 295-327.

ferring explicit violence and horror scenes—a so-called 'pornography of death'. The theory is symptomatic of the pessimistic cultural view the majority of researchers appear to have been sharing from the 1950s until somewhere in the 1970s. It took until the 1980s to go beyond this rather simplistic view of twentieth century modernity. Sociological works by Norbert Elias and Ullrich Beck, amongst others, have since then provided us with more complex theoretical frames[6].

In the meantime Gorer's article, republished in 1965, influenced an amateur historian who was to become the pioneer of the so-called 'death history': Philippe Ariès. Ariès, familiar with the work of Gorer, published his first article on death history as early as 1966. After a series of lectures at the John Hopkins University, a first volume was published in 1974, *Western Attitudes Toward Death*, containing an outline of the theses that would result in his master piece *L'homme devant la mort* of 1977[7]. Ariès was not just the first of a long series of historians to publish on the history of Western death culture, pioneering the subject. Most importantly he was a visionary researcher, collecting huge amounts of historical information, and adding an almost endless list of lesser and bigger theories. Until today his work stands out as a major source of inspiration for any researcher dealing with the theme of death in history. Unfortunately Ariès proved not to be as accurate in dealing with his sources as might be expected from a scientific point of view. Collegues have since then refuted a considerable part of his historiography[8]. A second important French researcher in this field was Michel Vovelle who published his own magnum opus on the subject in 1983, *La mort et l'Occident*[9]. In between those years, roughly the period 1975-1985, a great number of studies on the history of Western death culture was being published. Several other French historians joined Ariès and Vovelle[10]. In the meantime research on the field was being conducted in the English-speaking world as well, often very critical of the *histoire des mentalités* as being prac-

[6] Elias, *Über die Einsamkeit...*; and Ulrich Beck, *Risk Society. Towards a New Modernity,* London, Sage, 1992, 304 p.

[7] Philippe Ariès, *Western Attitudes Toward Death. From the Middle Ages to the Present*, Baltimore, The John Hopkins University Press, 1974, xi-111 p.; an extended version of this is to be found in Philippe Ariès, *Essais sur l'histoire de la mort en Occident: du Moyen âge à nos jours*, Paris, Seuil, 1975, 237 p. ; Philippe Ariès, *L'homme devant la mort*, Paris, Seuil, 1977, 642 p.

[8] Some of the reviews on Ariès' works include: Michel Vovelle, 'Encore la mort: un peu plus qu'une mode? Note critique', *Annales*, xxxvii, 1982, nr. 2, p. 276-287; Peter Burke, 'Death Revived', *History*, lxviii, 1983, nr. 222, p. 61-63; and Stephen Wilson, 'Death and the Social Historians: Some Recent Books in French and English', *Social History*, v, 1980, nr. 3, p. 435-451. See also some critical remarks in: Pim den Boer, 'Naar een geschiedenis van de dood: mogelijkheden tot onderzoek naar de houding ten opzichte van de dode en de dood ten tijde van de Republiek', *Tijdschrift voor Geschiedenis*, lxxxix, 1976, p. 161-201; Elias, *Über die Einsamkeit...*, chapter 4; and Joachim Whaley (ed.), *Mirrors of Mortality: Studies in the Social History of Death*, Londen, Europa, 1981, 252 p.

[9] Michel Vovelle, *La mort et l'Occident de 1300 à nos jours*, Paris, Gallimard, 1983, 793 p.

[10] A full survey in: Vovelle, 'Encore la mort...'.

tised by the leading French publishers[11]. Joachim Whaley, editor of the British volume *Mirrors of Mortality* of 1981, criticized Ariès for failing to relate changes in attitude to changes in material and political conditions.
Since the second half of the eighties the frequency of publications on the history of Western death culture has somewhat diminished. Recent studies appear to have been attempting to redirect the research of death history, away from mentality history and closer to social history, introducing political and economic as well as cultural changes in society as major factors in the evolution of death culture.
Still, the heritage of the mentality historians is not to be overlooked completely. The perspective Ariès and Vovelle have been using was that of the *longue durée*, allowing us to reconstruct a long-term survey. The greatest part of our history Western death culture appears to have been determined by Christian thought. Christian death culture might be characterized as the 'taming'[12] of death. In the eyes of a Christian of the Middle Ages death was not an ending point, but merely a point of transition of the eternal soul from a material into a spiritual state. As this spiritual state brought the soul (that is, the 'good' soul) closer to God, death was no reason for grief, quite the contrary. There was an absolute belief in an afterlife, hence no need to fear death. Neither was there need for funeral rituals: the body was merely a skin bag filled with bones, slime and shit, only the soul mattered. On the other hand the Christian doctrine predicted the so-called day of the last judgement, when God would wake all the dead. This resurrection would take place based upon the material remains of the body the soul once was in possession of. Therefore the bodily remains could not be destroyed—cremation was unacceptable—but had to be preserved, preferably as close as possible to God. The bodily remains were buried *ad sanctos*, namely in the grounds surrounding the churches. The rich could afford to be buried in the church floor, the others were thrown in large pits in the churchyard. If the churchyard became full, the old pits were opened, the bones taken out and stored in a separate building, and the ground was reused for more burials. This funeral culture was characterized by non-individuality and anonimity. Both Ariès and Vovelle point to shifting habits from the fourteenth century onwards, yet hard to summarize. There seems to have been a slowly rising sense of individualization, gradually resisting the Christian taming of death, and culminating in the seventeenth century in a wave of critics of the lack of hygiene and dignity in the overcrowded churchyards.
The Enlightenment rejected the old Christian death culture, and tried to introduce a new, civilian form of death culture. Western civil society now

[11] Amongst others: John McManners, *Death and the Enlightenment: Changing Attitudes to Death among Christians and Unbelievers in Eighteenth-Century France*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1981, vii-619 p.; Gordon Geddes, *Welcome Joy: Death in Puritan New England*, Ann Arbor, UMI Research Press, 1981, 262 p.; and Whaley, *Mirrors of Mortality*...
[12] The expression is derived of Ariès. See: Ariès, *Western Attitudes*...

went on to confront death, and even to resist it. Romanticism flirted with death and embraced the coming of the Great Darkness; nationalism introduced the notion of a 'Nation' that would comprise all those who belonged to it, the living as well as the dead or those yet to be born; and twentieth century social welfare society took a whole array of new medical techniques to the battle field. Funeral culture too went through a series of fundamental changes. New cemeteries were created in order to replace the old churchyards. The Napoleonic law of 1804 introduced a new way of burying: with separate, individual graves and the possibility to decorate the grave with signs of mourning. Although church authorities throughout the West were able to maintain a virtual monopoly on funeral rites, the old medieval Christian funeral culture had fully disappeared by the end of the nineteenth century.
It is interesting to confront this survey with a study that was published in the Netherlands in 1990. In analyzing emotional responses to deceases between 1750 and 1988, Dorothe Sturkenboom came to comparable conclusions[13]. Before 1800 emphasis was put on comforting the mourning relatives: they should not suffer from grief, for their beloved was with God. They should trust in God and restrain from heavy emotions. After 1800 more attention was given to expressing empathy for the relatives: their emotions had become more important than their religious doctrine. In Protestant Holland too a religious, spiritual death culture was being exchanged for a civil, earthly one [14].

Towards a Social History of Death Culture

In order to study death culture and the socialist movement, we need to dispose of a general frame of the social history of Western death culture of the past two centuries. Several recent publications have looked into aspects of this complex history. The picture however remains blurred and fragmented. What happened of the ideas and practices of Western death culture after the eighteenth century? On the idea-side two different trends seem to have been occurring.
Firstly, we may observe a process of secularisation. During the nineteenth and twentieth centuries there was a growing rejection of religous beliefs concerning afterlife. A shift took place from religion to ideology. In this trend a collective response to the problem of the finiteness of life was maintained, yet alternatives to the Christian beliefs concerning Heaven and Hell were sought for. It is here that we may situate some of the neo- or pseudo-religious social initiatives of the past two centuries, such as Victor

[13] Dorothe Sturkenboom, '"...Want ware zielesmart is niet woordenrijk": Veranderende gevoelscodes voor nabestaanden 1750-1988', Albert van der Zeijden (ed.), *De cultuurgeschiedenis van de dood*, Amsterdam/Atlanta, Rodopi, 1990, p. 84-113 (Balans en perspectief van de Nederlandse cultuurgeschiedenis).
[14] See also: Den Boer, 'Naar een geschiedenis...'

Hugo's séances of spiritism, that were attended to by several prominent French socialist leaders[15], or the religious sects of the late twentieth century. Jennifer Hecht has published a study of the French *Société d'autopsie mutuelle*, founded in 1876 by a group of men who pledged to dissect one another's brains in the hope of advancing science. She points out that this society was an effort by freethinking, strongly anticlerical republican scientists and citizens to create an alternative to Christian last rites[16].

> For people who rejected religion so strenuously that they saw burial as an unbearably cultish ritual, but who could not bear utterly disappearing, the society provided great comfort.[17]

Still most of these associations never reached a large public. Much more important were the great nineteenth-century ideologies. Large social movements as nationalism or socialism offerred collective frames of reference to their followers that could provide them with supra-individual prolongations of their existence beyond the boundary of life and death. With the nationalist movements for instance the key concept was 'the Nation'. The Nation not simply included people of the present, but also those of the past and the future. One of the strongest symbols of the young French republic was the Panthéon, where its heroes lay buried. Dead, but not gone[18]. Later in the nineteenth century the new civil cemetery in the French cities grew to become a reflection of the living city: the Necropolis, the city of the dead, as much a part of the Nation as the city of the living[19]. Similar notions, centred upon the concept of 'the Revolution', were developed in the socialist and communist movements.

Secondly, another trend to be noticed is the process of individualization. We may observe what I would like to refer to as a new sensitivity towards life: an ever growing investment in the self, attaching ever more value to self-fulfilment, including the emotional level. It is hard to observe what happened to individual ideas and attitudes concerning the finiteness of life, as these are deepseated in the minds and personality. Still, some traces are to be found. Dignity for the dead, was what citizens in the seventeenth century asked for when they criticized the overcrowded and neglected state of the old

[15] Thomas A. Kselman, *Death and the Afterlife in Modern France*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1993, chapter 4.

[16] Jennifer M. Hecht, 'French Scientific Materialism and the Liturgy of Death: The Invention of a Secular Version of Catholic Last Rites (1876-1914)', *French Historical Studies*, xx, 1997, nr. 4, p. 703-735.

[17] Hecht, *French Scientific Materialism...*, p. 706.

[18] Ben-Amos Avner, 'Les funérailles de Victor Hugo: apothéose de l'événement spectacle', Pierre Nora (ed.), *Les lieux de mémoire*, Parijs, Gallimard, 1984, vol. I, p. 473-522.

[19] On the new cemeterie in France, see: Kselman, *Death and the Afterlife...*; Richard Etlin, *The Architecture of Death: the Transformation of the Cemetery in Eighteenth-Century Paris*, Cambridge, MIT Press, 1984, xiv-441 p.; and James Stevens Curl, *A Celebration of Death: An Introduction to Some of the Buildings, Monuments and Settings of Funerary Architecture in the Western European Tradition*, London, Constable, 1980.

churchyards. In the Protestant world, the Evangelical Revival of the eighteenth century stated that Heaven would be open for all those who believed, whereas until then Calvinist predestination had bereft the individual of all initiative in this matter during lifetime[20]. During the nineteenth century the increase of the standard of living and the decrease of mortality rates must have strenghtened the sensitivity towards life and at the same time distanced the individual from his or her moment of death[21]. These trends were only to be intensified in the twentieth century, while joined by the successes of the medical science. We may only guess at what effects such changing conditions of life may have had. Lindsay Prior points to some of those while analysing early nineteenth-century medical techniques. According to Prior, in the pre-industrial world it seemed that death could strike arbitrarily at any age. Thus the metaphor frequently used to symbolise human mortality was the rolling of dice. Growing statistical knowledge of birth and death ratios however seemed to make death predictable in some way. The medical reports on deaths on the other hand always mentioned the cause of death. Thus death was no longer something that happened by itself, but a phenomenon that had a cause, and therefore might be controlled and avoided[22]. Such opinions leave not much room for an afterlife or even a death culture in general. The higher life was valued the more difficult it became to confront its finiteness. As the trend of attaching importance towards life continued, eventually it would have been not uncommon to push the idea of death aside, and to develop an imminent sense of immortality. Elias claims that 'fantasies of immortality' have become a common aspect of a twentieth-century individual's state of mind[23].

These two trends potentially might contradict each other, as one is offerring a collective alternative afterlife, while the other would drive an individual to ignore the end of life. Yet they are reconciliable, and have probably been so during most of the past two centuries. We may observe a rather complex chronology here. In the nineteenth century religion was losing ground, and ideologies were coming up; in the twentieth century—especially after the Second World War—religion was losing even more ground, and now so were ideologies, whereas the second trend got the upper hand. That would make 'ideology' a key word for the nineteenth-century history of Western death culture, and 'medicalization' for the twentieth century.

The practices of death culture are bound to reflect the ideas. Yet the powers that be may have a much greater weight here. More specifically the conflict between Church and State has been of a determinant influence upon funeral

[20] Peter C. Jupp, 'Enon Chapel: No Way for the Dead', Peter C. Jupp and Glennys Howarth (eds.), *The Changing Face of Death: Historical Accounts of Death and Disposal*, Basingstoke, MacMillan, 1997, p. 90-104.

[21] Vovelle, *La mort et l'Occident...*, chapter 30.

[22] Lindsay Prior, 'Actuarial Visions of Death: Life, Death and Chance in the Modern World', Jupp, *The Changing Face...*, p. 177-193.

[23] Elias, *Über die Einsamkeit...*, chapter 9.

and mourning rites. In the course of the nineteenth century political reforms have replaced much of the old churchyards by new cemeteries, controlled by public authorities, church authorities, private associations or a combination of those. This was joined by the institution of new funeral and mourning rites, gradually replacing old Christian habits, although religious authorities remained predominantly in control of funeral and mourning procedures. Thomas Kselman, an American historian, has provided us with an important and extensive survey of the evolutions in French nineteenth-century death culture in his volume *Death and the Afterlife in Modern France*. Two important historical facts appear to mark the creation of a new funeral culture, both to take place in 1804. First, there was the opening of Père Lachaise in Paris, the first of the new cemeteries. This was the outcome of a political struggle that had begun in the second half of the eighteenth century, in the heyday of French Enlightenment. The idea behind the new cemetery was to create a wide area away from the overcrowded city centres, where people could contemplate the death of their beloved in serenity, without interference of a religious doctrine.

> By the end of the [eighteenth] century [...] cemetery design began to reflect a new understanding of nature as a regenerative force. Now the appropriate setting for tombs was seen to be an area of trees and serpentine walks, which would provoke recollection and contemplation that would be morally beneficial. These ideas were developed and combined in a number of ways, but they were linked in their rejection of the macabre imagery that had been central to the Christian presentation of death since the Middle Ages. The fascination of the baroque era with skeletons and skulls that would remind people of their mortality and of the need to prepare for the next world was no longer considered appropriate. Enlightenment reformers sought to remove cemeteries from urban areas and to design them according to fashions that emphasized the contemplation of heroic deeds and natural sublimity rather than the physical remains of the dead. These ideals were shared by leaders of the revolution, who acted to transfer control of cemeteries from churches to communes [and] to establish a national cult of the dead.[24]

The second fact to mark the arrival of a new funeral culture was the Imperial Decree of 23 prairal, year XII (1804). A number of important reforms were being proclaimed: burial in churches was being interdicted; new cemeteries had to be created outside the city; common graves were no longer allowed, the individual grave became obligatory; individuals could obtain a concession to rent the piece of territory taken in by the grave; and families were allowed to decorate the grave and erect a funeral monument. The execution of this decree in France and in a large part of the continent in the fol-

[24] Kselman, *Death and the Afterlife...*, p. 168.

lowing years was to mark the beginning of a 'New Cult of the Dead'. Part of this new funeral culture in France were the *pompes funèbres*, conspiciously decorated funeral-processions to show off the social status of the deceased. These were provided for by private undertakers, thus marking another line of evolution of nineteenth-century funeral culture: its commercialization.
The decree of 1804, although inspired by Enlightenment doctrine, gave way to a funeral culture which was not quite what Enlightenment thinkers had intended. The latter had propagated a cemetery that would look like a garden, where all would be equal in the world of darkness. Yet the concessions soon caused a lack of space, so that the garden concept was left behind to be replaced by a rectangular structure with one grave beside the other on both sides of long, straight 'streets'. At the same time the possibility of erecting funeral monuments gave rise to the habit of expressing the social status of wealthy and/or important deceased through conspiciously decorated monuments. Instead of being a garden of equality, the new cemetery became a mirror of the modern metropolis, reflecting and even emphasizing the social differences of the world of the living.
The evolution in funeral culture in Great-Britain appears to have been somewhat different, as there never was a conflict here between political and religious authorities comparable to France. Peter Jupp points out that conflicts between competing Protestant Churches over control of the churchyard have been a major factor to lead to the funeral laws of the 1850s, whereby part of the authority over the new cemeteries was taken from the hands of the Churches[25].

Thus Western death culture went through a series of transformations during the nineteenth century, continued and even intensified in the twentieth century, reflecting some of the major patterns of the history of Western societies. Still, to speak of a social history of death culture, we need to take this further. It is not clear just how far the evolving ideas and practices as described above are to have affected the whole of the population. Can these have been otherwise than élitist in a more or lesser degree? Are the lower strata of society to have shared the same kind of death culture, a retarded version of the same, a death culture of their own, or—seemingly the most probable—a combination of this? A major field of research is for the most part still lying bare.
Sometimes an author will allow us a glimpse of what is going on in the back of Western death culture. Philippe Ariès made an intriguing observation when he looked into the first centuries of Western death culture. Out of several sources came the notion of an attitude of resignation towards death[26].

[25] Jupp, 'Enon Chapel...'. For Germany, see: Suzanne E. Rieser, *Sterben, Tod und Trauer: Mythen, Riten und Symbole im Tirol des 19. Jahrhunderts*, Innsbruck, Institut für Sprachwissenschaft der Universität Innsbruck, 1991, 171 p.
[26] Ariès, *Western Attitudes...*, chapter 1.

Ariès assigned a number of characteristics to this death culture of resigned acceptance. The central position is taken by the person who is dying: this person will feel death coming, and will perform a series of ritual actions. The dying person will take off clothes and arms, bid farewell to friends and family, lie down, and wait resignedly for death to come. Ariès is not very clear on where or when this death culture of resignation is to be situated. It seems to date from Antiquity or at least the pre-Christian era, yet in one way or another seems to stretch out over the centuries in areas distanced from the heartlands of Western civilization. We might assume that this death culture of resignation is some kind of archetypal death culture, and that it is to be found in lower and distanced parts of society. Following such a hypothesis we would need to figure out how succesful (or not) each of the different Western death cultures has been in dealing with this archetypal death culture of resignation. If there is to have been such an archetype, it might have survived until the recent era of medicalization.
There are more traces. Kselman reports on difficulties arising from the introduction of the new death culture on the French countryside. People in smaller cities seem to have had mixed reactions. Some agreed to exchange the old churchyards for new cemeteries, for reasons of hygiene and dignity, others refused to move the old ancestral graves to another spot, yet for reasons quite different from the old Christian beliefs:

> [C]emeteries were emblems of family and local identity that allowed people to observe and recall their continuity through time. Cemeteries were a priviliged "memory place" that embodied the deeply felt ties holding together families, neighborhoods, and villages.[27]

Catherine Merridale, in her study on death culture in Soviet Russia, points to a number of mourning rituals that are to be classified under the heading of superstitions. She too states that although these beliefs were not part of Christian religion, they definitely did belong to a kind of death culture, deeply rooted in Russian society:

> Whether individuals fully believed in these superstitions is at one level unimportant ; their persistance indicates that they were at least effective as strategies for allaying the collective anxiety about death in a high-mortality world.[28]

If there is to have been a social differentiation in death culture, it will have been of particular importance to the socialist movement. As a mass ideology, its associations often founded by progressive bourgeois, yet oriented towards the lower strata, socialism might have played a key role in the clash between 'popular' and 'élitist' kinds of death culture.

[27] Kselman, *Death and the Afterlife...*, p. 179.
[28] Merrridale, 'Death and Memory...', p. 7.

Socialism and Death Culture: Immortality Through Revolution

In several ways the socialist movement has participated in the transformations of Western death culture during the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Not quite friends to religious culture, socialists have been actively engaged in the search for alternatives for religious notions and practices of afterlife, funeral and mourning. French socialists like Fourier or Leroux are known to have been active participants of spiritist gatherings[29]. Yet spiritism was of a much too individualistic character, belonging to bourgeois culture, and no real answer to collective problems of fear of death or grief. Socialists have also engaged in free-thinking associations. Death culture was never far away here. Paule Verbruggen surpisingly observes in her study of religious notions with the socialist movement of Ghent, Belgium, that the local socialist free-thinking associations were almost solely occupied with funeral insurances and the organisation of civil burials for its members[30]. The socialist free-thinking movement was able to powerfully manifest itself as a non-religious, lower-stratum alternative to official and Christian funeral culture on several occasions, but never made it to a new standard, and faded away in the first half of the twentieth century[31]. Another alternative socialists were engaging in was cremation. The political struggle for legalisation of cremation was more or less successful in the last quarter of the nineteenth century [32]. Cremation was a powerful alternative to funeral culture, and could have triggered a fundamental renewal of death culture. But the militants did not follow, the great majority remained attached to the rite of burial. This became painfully clear during Soviet government in Russia. According to Merridale, from the 1920s onwards the Bolsheviks attacked traditional Church-led funeral culture, and attempted to introduce the practice of secular, scientific cremation as the socialist alternative to burial. But cremation was 'entirely alien' to Russian funeral culture, and in the 1990s burial again became the predominant funeral rite[33]. Each of these alternatives to aspects of death culture has a rich history of its own, and the story of the role the socialist movement has played in it is for the largest part yet to be written. However, focusing on phenomena as spiritism, free-thinkers, civil funerals or cremation would be like missing the point of it all. The real history of socialism and death culture is somewhere else.

[29] Kselman, *Death and the Afterlife...*, chapter 4.
[30] Paule Verbruggen, *Deelalternatieven voor traditionele godsdienstbeleving in het Gentse socialisme (1870-1914)*, Ghent, unpublished thesis University of Ghent-Unity of Contemporary History, 1982, p. 142.
[31] Anne Morelli, 'Les funérailles de dirigeants socialistes comme manifestations laïques', *Brood & Rozen*, 1998, nr. 2, p. 67-73.
[32] For instance, cremation was legalized in some way or another in Italy (1874), Germany (Gotha, 1878), Switserland (1884), France (1887), Sweden (1888), Denmark (1892), Norway (1898), Spain (1901) and Great-Britain (1902). See: Karel Velle, *Begraven of cremeren. De crematiekwestie in België*, Gent, Stichting Mens en Kultuur, 1992, 127 p.
[33] Merridale, 'Death and Memory...'.

What was then specific about the contribution the socialist movement has made to Western death culture? Eventually the socialist movement itself , its goals and its struggles, were the alternative socialism has offerred to Western death culture. The socialist movement provided existential immortality and a secular identity to its perished followers. Socialist funerals were unique, mass-scale and spectacular manifestations, engaging both the living and the dead, and joining grief and combat beyond the boundary of life and death. Michael Rohrwasser, in a fascinating study of attitudes towards death in socialist literature, has concluded that fear of death was being overcome by admitting the dying to the ranks of the 'eternal party', thus providing him or her with a status of immortality:

> Das auffälligste und zugleich häufigste Todesbild in der sozialistischen Literatur ist die Verheißung einer Unsterblichkeit im Kollektiv, das Aufgehen im siegreichen Geschichtsplan [...]. Die Helden werden weiterleben, »eingeschreint im größen Herzen der Arbeiterklasse«, heißt es bei Karl Marx. Die Identität des »WIR« hebt die Sterblichkeit des Einzelnen auf. In der Partei, im Kampfverband, in der Geschichte lebt der Tote weiter.[34]

Rorhwasser also notices a striking characteristic. Once the dying is being assimilated by the eternal socialist struggle, he or she looses any distinguishing mark of individuality. The socialist death not only brings comfort and meaning, it is also the fulfilment of the wish to leave behind 'the petty bourgeois identity', an initiation ceremony into the perfect proletarian identity.
This is the answer of the socialist movement to the existential fever the finiteness of life is causing: the very attention the movement is giving to the deceased and his or her relatives, lifting traditional mourning rites to a public level and turning them into a collective process. The meaninglessness of death is being overcome by the presence of numerous comrades by the deathbed, lining the streets where the funeral procession is passing, by the prominents sending their regards, by the party office sending funeral wreaths, by the party paper publishing on the deceased, and by the ideology that says: 'a dead comrade is still a comrade'. Thus the Revolution is to the socialist movement what the Nation is to the nationalist movement. This may also explain the ambiguous attitude of the socialist movement towards suicide: a sympathetic understanding in the case of oppressed intellectuals, fellow-workers losing their jobs and haunted by poverty, or female servants made pregnant by bourgeois sons. But never for party-members: their suicide would merely weaken the movement[35].

[34] Michael Rohrwasser, 'Über den Umgang mit dem Tod in der Sozialistischen Literatur', *Frankfurter Hefte*, xxxviii, 1983, nr. 3, p. 57.
[35] Pasteur, 'Le mouvement ouvrier...', p. 15.

The most visible manifestation of this socialist death culture has always been its funerals, especially—but not exclusively—those of the prominents of the movement. Contrary to Christian or liberal, but not unlike nationalist funerals, the socialist movement has turned its funerals into huge spectacles with all the pomp and splendour they could get[36]. One of the first tasks the new communist government of Russia was facing in 1917 was the burial of the 238 'heroes' who had died in the struggle for Moscow. A 'communist', atheist funeral ceremony had to be improvized. Merridale reports:

> Every factory, office, and theatre in the city was closed for the occasion. Open coffins were carried through the city to their burial place in the Kremlin wall. The cortege was followed by a battalion of the Red Guard, in its slow progress accompanied by the ritual (and traditional) wailing of women. Red banners fluttered from the Kremlin's battlements, their message confirming that the deaths marked the birth of a new life, that of the workers' and peasants' republic.[37]

Seven years later, another hero funeral with Lenin's death in 1924. A mausoleum is being constructed to hold Lenin's embalmed corpse. Again Merridale:

> The leader's body, like that of a pre-revolutionary saint, would not corrupt. [...] His death, like those of other heroes, glorified the collective enterprise of building socialism. Such a sense of purpose assuaged the grief which, bereft of any sense of a compensatory afterlife, could otherwise only mourn, and even seek to avenge, the senseless obliteration of life.[38]

Whether the socialist movement has succeeded in creating its own socialist death culture as a lasting alternative remains an open question. As stated above, the powerful process of medicalization of Western death culture in the second half of the twentieth century has probably surpassed all other historical variations of death culture. Apart from this, it is not yet clear how far-reaching the influence of the socialist alternative has been with the whole of society, or even with its own members. Still, enough observations can be gathered to conclude that the socialist movement did participate in the transformation of Western death culture in the past two centuries. Let us hope the issue will not rest in peace.

[36] Verbruggen, *Deelalternatieven voor traditionele...*, p. 143.
[37] Merridale, 'Death and Memory...', p. 7.
[38] Merridale, 'Death and Memory...', p. 8.