Do we deny death? II. Critiques of the death-denial thesis

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ABSTRACT

The first part of this article, published in an earlier issue of this journal, provided an overview of how the death-denial thesis took shape and spread in the social sciences between the 1930s and 1980s. By 'death-denial thesis' we refer to the assumption according to which Western societies seek to deny the reality of death. In this second part of the article, we turn our attention to the most extensive critiques addressed to the said thesis. We attempt to assess the present state of the narrative and to outline how its apparent obsolescence today opens new avenues of exploration for death studies.

Overview of the main critiques to the death-denial thesis

Despite having been at the core of innumerable studies, the concept of death-denial remains extremely loose. Several works have tended to take the existence of the taboo for granted, systematically failing to provide convincing evidence for it. Thus, although Ariès's argument has come under attack on a variety of fronts (the breadth of the study, the accuracy of peri-odisation, the dynamics through which poorly defined 'Western societies' came to deny death, the excessive use of literary sources), the idea that death is being denied in modern Europe and North America tends to be commonly embraced. Matters are further complicated by the fact that, in much of the literature on the topic, heterogeneous factors are grouped together and labelled as 'denial'. Amongst such factors we commonly find the medicalisation of death, the beautification of the corpse and embalming, the reluctance to speak of death in public, the segregation of the sick and the elderly in hospices, and the bureaucratisation of death-procedures.

Intertwined as it is with the aims of the hospice-movement, the medicalisation of death and its assumedly dehumanising consequences might be the most extensively debated amongst these aspects. Medicalisation is generally associated to denial in that high-tech medicine and the hope it inspires 'make death unacceptable', while the hospital setting 'makes for the isolation, loneliness, and despair of the dying' (Bregman, 1999, p. 78). Medicalisation is then often equated with depersonalisation, as if the latter were a self-evi-dent consequence of the first: the absence of the confessor at the bedside, or the fact that

death-care is performed by medical practitioners, cause the dying to die in an impersonal and meaningless way (Wood & Williamson, 2003, p. 34). More generally, the notion of denial seems to rely on an equation of solitude with emptiness, implying that no meaning or sense of fulfilment can be achieved outside the circle of an organic community, especially at the time of death.

Some of the criticism described above emerged in the 1970s, when several studies which questioned the narrative of death-denial began to be published. In 1972, for example, Dennis Dumont and Richard Foss (1972) published *The American View of Death: Acceptance of Denial?*, a review which attempted to compare and contrast the body of literature based on the claim that Americans denied death, and the evidence provided to the opposite. The authors concluded that American attitudes towards death were rather ambivalent, and they could not be classified as either accepting or denying.

A year later, in the *Journal of Death and Dying,* an article appeared (Donaldson, 1973) which took issue with the ambiguity of the term 'denial': since it was unclear how it could be measured, and what constituted it in the first place, it was 'impossible' to conclude that Americans were death-denying. Donaldson was not alone in pointing to this lack of clarity. In 1975, sociologist Lyn Lofland authored the introduction to a special issue of the journal *Urban Life* dedicated on the topics of death and dying. Lofland expressed her hope that a sociological, rather than psychological or psychiatric, approach to the topic may have brought a higher degree of complexity and nuance to the discussion. She drew attention to the fact that the literature available on the subject tended to gloss over important distinctions, which resulted in appealing yet hollow assertions:

> One does not have to bother to ask what Americans, in what social group, of what age, under what conditions, with what degree of salience, and covering what time period. Just "Americans". One does not have to ask what exactly it means to deny or accept, what actions or opinions or practices indicate one or the other. One does not have even to consider possibly complex, possibly simultaneously held but contradictory, possibly varying orientations. Just "deny" or "accept". (Lofland, 1975, pp. 244, 245)

Lofland's criticism could be extended to the whole narrative (and not only to American attitudes): Ariès, like other authors who subscribed to the thesis, suggested that death was being denied in Western societies at large, making little or no effort to explore or challenge variations in the contemporary denial of death within what he calls the 'West'.

In 1978, then, Lofland went on to write one of the most scathing critiques of the death-denial thesis. In *The Craft of Dying*, the author explored the reasons of the surge in death-related literature. Three main factors, she wrote, were generally pointed to as causes for the contemporary change in attitudes towards death: the prolongation of life through technology and medicine, the bureaucratisation of death and the secularisation of the process of dying. Such shifts, in turn, caused changes in the role of the dying and that of the bereaved, raising questions about the meaning of death in a secularised, technological world. If indeed there had been a time in which death was ignored in public discourse, Lofland argued, there was no need of resorting to notions of taboo and denial to analyse it. Such silence could be accounted for by looking at demographic changes. When new technologies emerged to prolong life, a new social category, that of dying people, was created. Yet, the members of that category were not immediately conscious of their existence and needs as part of a social group and they could not organise as a social movement. By contrast, when this group reached a critical mass, '[t]he hiatus on death and dying as public discourse ends. The

emergence of death and dying as fad, fashion, and social movement begins' (Lofland, 1978, p. 37).

Lofland harshly criticised what she termed the 'happy death movement', a loose set of individuals, organisations and activities 'concerned with promoting a change in American society with regard to its beliefs about death and dying' (p. 77). These groups included associations like the *Foundation of Thanatology, Ars Moriendi*, the *Forum for Death Education and Counselling*, and a variety of practitioners (physicians, nurses, social workers, counsellors, psychologists). They promoted their aims through books, films, newsletters, lectures, lobbying groups and other means. Since the cornerstone of the movement was the assertion that death was a taboo in contemporary Western society, a great part of the activities was aimed at infringing the silence surrounding death, and at convincing Americans to open conversations on the subject. Talking about death, based on the principles of grief therapy, was also assumed to have a healing quality.

According to Lofland, the 'happy-death movement' was not exclusively concerned with legislation and personal well-being: it also made claims about the appropriate meaning of death and dying, creating an ideology by setting up an ideal and contrasting it to the presumed reality. This manufactured ideal was exemplified, in Lofland's view, by a quotation of Kübler-Ross's *On Death and Dying*, where the author described the death of a farmer in Switzerland, which she witnessed in her infancy. The farmer died at home surrounded by his family, peacefully taking leave from friends and relatives, making arrangements for the future of his belongings. This ideal of a good death was contrasted to a present state characterised by high funeral costs, exploitative funeral practices, the segregation of the dying, and a mechanistic conception of life and death. The forging of an opposition between idealised and current practices enabled a discourse by which a 'social problem' was 'created' (p. 91). Lofland took issue in particular with the fact that the lack of empirical evidence for the taboo was irrelevant to its proponents, because the narrative served a purpose in the social movement aimed at opening discussions about death. Lofland's contribution had a rather critical tone, as she was very aware of the ideological component of a movement which had a lot in common with the 'humanistic-counterculture' denouncement of modern Western society as 'dehumanising, unemotional, technologically dominated, inauthentic' (p. 92). Assessing if and how death in Western societies is in fact dehumanising, unemotional, and inauthentic or providing a critique of palliative care, exceeds however the scope of this paper. Our focus lies instead on tracing the development, implications, and underlying assumptions of the death-denial thesis.

After having been criticised on sociological grounds, the accuracy of the death-denial thesis was questioned, in 1981, from a historical perspective. In a contribution to the edited volume *Mirrors of Mortality: Studies in the Social History of Death*, historian David Cannadine lamented that although Gorer's (1955) study was about contemporary Britain, it embodied a bold assumption about grieving in the past. The death-denial thesis, in fact, 'enlists nostalgia in its support' (Cannadine, 1981, p. 187), contrasting Victorian death-bed scenes in which the dying is ***tenderly assisted by the family to the twentieth century death in the hospital. A dehumanising death characterised by 'loneliness, irrelevance and an absence of awareness', and by dying 'drugged, lonely and afraid' (David Stannard quoted in Cannadine, 1981, p. 188). Gorer, Cannadine noted, could not substantiate the assumption that the rituals and ceremonies surrounding death before the twentieth century catered for the psychological needs of the deceased-to-be and of the bereaved. Victorian mourning customs, far from

being healthy, may have on the contrary prevented the normal reintegration of the deceased into society, and they may have been greatly encouraged by funeral companies that profited from the sale of mourning items (brooches, aprons, lockets, necklaces, earrings, parasols, even bathing costumes) (Cunnington & Lucas, 1972, p. 253). This economic aspect also played a major role in monumental cemeteries like Highgate and Kensal: the price of their plots depended on the location and the view, and they had a lot in common with expensive and fashionable cemeteries such as Forest Lawn (famously parodied as 'Whispering Glades' in Evelyn Waugh's *The Loved One* 1948/2012).

The author's claim that Victorian mourning customs may have been considered excessive, unhealthy and dispendious for the Victorians themselves is substantiated by the fact that in 1875 the *National Funeral and Mourning Reform Association* campaigned for the simplification of mourning rituals, and against undertakers taking advantage of the vulnerability of the bereaved. Evidence to the effect that extravagant mourning attires and excessive expenses roused the indignation of the Victorians was also presented by John Morley in his *Death, Heaven and the Victorians* (Morley, 1971). Thus, rather than having been centred on the needs of the deceased, Victorian funeral customs may appear as precursors of the twentieth century American ones. To conclude, according to Cannadine, the sentimental view offered by the death-denial literature, besides being based on assumptions which are mostly unproven, ignored ceremonial and demographic developments at the end of the century. In particular, he suggested that the impact of the Great War on attitudes towards death had been neglected, and that inter-war Britain was in fact 'obsessed with death' (Cannadine, 1981, p. 189). Thus, 'contrary to both the received view and the prevailing nostalgia, the best time to die and to grieve in modern Britain is probably now' (ibid.).

A few years later, sociologist Allan Kellehear (1984) challenged another aspect of the death-denial thesis, drawing attention to the fallacy of equating medicalisation with denial. It was true, Kellehear claimed, that death had become a 'technology intensive and potentially contaminating situation in need of sanitising' (Kellehear, 1984, p. 716), and was therefore increasingly perceived as an illness. But this change in perspective did not imply a form of denial. Kellehear took issue also with the omnipresent claim that the embalming of the corpse is evidence of denial. Rather than being an attempt to avoid confronting the reality of death through the concealment of the signs of decomposition, he suggested that embalming had gained popularity because funeral companies recognised the marketability of the contemporary obsession for beautifying the body. As demonstrated by the history of post-mortem photography, dead bodies in the past were composed and often portrayed as sleeping (instead of being depicted as manifestly dead), even before embalmment techniques became widespread.[1] Kellehear also attributed the self-control that the bereaved are generally expected to demonstrate in public to the common social practice by which we avoid personal topics or excessive displays of emotions when in the company of other people. He therefore concluded that individual attitudes towards death must be distinguished from collective ones, as societies 'do not deny death but instead organise for it and around it' (Kellehear, 1984, p. 720).

Another prominent figure in the sociology of death, sociologist Tony Walter, authored a paper on a similar topic. In 'Modern Death: Taboo or Not Taboo?' (1991), Walter attempted to assess the taboo-thesis to understand whether it could have accounted for contemporary attitudes towards death. He individuated several possible modifications of the thesis, amongst which: that death was a taboo until the 1960s, but that it is now ceasing to be so

because of the new attention to the topic; that modern people were less familiar with death because life had been prolonged through the improvements of medicine; that the taboo was limited to medical practitioners, as death was considered a failure to cure, but was not held as such by the whole of society; that death could have been universally problematic, not only in western society; and, finally, that individuals, and not modern societies, could be considered death-denying.

In more recent times, further papers have directly addressed the topic of death-denial, complicating its narrative. Camilla Zimmermann and Gary Rodin's 'The denial of death thesis: sociological critique and implications for palliative care' (2004), for example, contests the parallel often drawn between denial and medicalisation. The fact that death is framed as a medical condition, they suggest, is to be attributed to the understanding of it as a scientific, biological process. Likewise, the fact that the dying are put in hospitals and hospices is not an intentional segregation of a condition which must be kept from public sight, but the consequence of bureaucratisation, which is 'our characteristic form of social structure' (Blauner, 1966, p. 384).

The authors also discovered, through a literature search, that clinical and palliative care papers often purported that conversations about death and end-of-life are hushed up or avoided. This is an important component of the argument that a 'conspiracy of silence' surrounds the topics of death and dying, and that death is no longer discussed in public. Yet, the notion is paradoxical. As already written by Lofland (1978, p. 92) a few years earlier, 'one might consider it somewhat odd that the statement that death is a taboo topic in America should continue to be asserted in the face of nearly a decade of nonstop talking on the subject'.

Zimmermann (2007) continued her research on the topic in 'Death denial: obstacle or instrument for palliative care? An analysis of clinical literature', this time adopting the approach of discourse-analysis. The article is of particular interest as it draws attention to the ideological aspects of the death-denial narrative, and to the paradox at its core. By denouncing aspects perceived as detrimental (such as not wishing to talk about one's mortality), the narrative generates a moral discourse defining 'a "right" and a "wrong" way to die, the right way being exemplified in the creation of the ideal of the "good death" [...] and the wrong way represented by the demon of death denial' (Zimmermann, 2007, p. 307). Thus, while intending to challenge a prescribed way of dying, the discourse of death denial generated a new one based on the assumption that death was taboo and repressed. The current shift away from that assumption has recently led scholars to deem valid and worthy of consideration ways of dying that would have been so far disqualified as denial.

Death denial today

The contributions previously mentioned directly challenged the death-denial thesis, confronting it as a whole and attempting to demonstrate the fallacy of its staples. Yet, a wealth of specialised scholarly works focussing on specific phenomena has now emerged, contributing to demonstrate that far from being kept from view, death is increasingly represented in today's public sphere. The volume *Die neue Sichtbarkeit des Todes*, edited by Macho and Marek (2011), discusses ways in which death and dead bodies are publicly depicted in medias, in the coverage of celebrities' deaths, in cinema, photography and popular culture. The representation of corpses in popular culture has indeed increased and changed over the

last decades, as described by Tina Weber (2012) in her book *Drop Dead Gorgeous: Representations of Corpses in American TV Shows*.

The correlation between medicalisation and denial of death has also been further contested in recent times. In 2012, German sociologist Hubert Knoblauch conducted a survey on the acceptance of clinical dissections in Germany. The starting point of his research was the unexplained decrease in clinical dissection in Western countries over recent decades. Knoblauch (2012) found that instead of being a symptom of fear towards death, medicine and the corpse, 'the most important reason for the decline in dissections is the replacement of invasive manipulations of the body by new forms of technologically acquired visual information' (pp. 304, 305). He also discovered that the individuals who took the survey agreed more than ever with the idea of their own body or that of relatives being dissected for medical reasons.

Death-denial has also come under attack from the perspective of body politics. In the recent book *Governing the Dead: Sovereignty and the Politics of Dead Bodies*, social scientist Finn Stepputat (2016) criticises the notion that death is marginalised, suppressed or denied in Western society, arguing that the relationship to death in pre-modern societies has often been romanticised. In particular, he challenges Foucault's argument according to which death constitutes the end, the limit of power and biopower, that death is 'outside the power relationship' as 'the moment when the individual escapes all power' (Foucault, quoted in Stepputat, 2016, p. 16). Through his cross-cultural study of body politics, he demonstrates instead that dead bodies are interwoven in political relations, and that their treatment, burial, and display, rather than being denied, repulsed, or ignored, is strictly regulated by public health institutions as much as by notions of dignity of the human body.

In the field of popular culture, historian Helen Frisby (2014) showed that folk funerary customs were not altogether denied and replaced in twentieth century Britain. On the contrary, they 'proved remarkably adaptable to the challenges of industrial modernity' (Frisby, 2014, p. 123). Frisby thus challenged the narrative of disenchantment so often associated with the notion that death is being denied in contemporary societies. She was one of the many speakers at various editions of the annual conference on death studies held in Alba Iulia, Romania, between 2007 and 2015. Thanks to the work of its organisers, this venue became a yearly opportunity for death scholars to exchange ideas that helped reshape the study of death across disciplinary and national boundaries, moving away from an excessive focus on death-denial (Rotar, 2017).

In a more private vein, American historian Thomas Laqueur argued in his 2015 book *The Work of the Dead. A Cultural History of Mortal Remains* that the dead never stopped 'working' in the world of the living, and therefore that we have never been disenchanted (p. 18). The original idea of his book dated from 1983, incidentally the year when Michel Vovelle published his *opus magnum* on death. Laqueur, then a student, had formulated what he described as a 'vague' project entitled 'The Meaning of Death in Post-Reformatory Britain'. It was, as he recalled,

> a search for a history of death that would go beyond the one told by demographers and doctors on the one hand and intellectual historians and scholars of religion on the other. I took meaning to be essentially an inner experience that might have an accessible history. (Laqueur, 2015, p. x)

During the 30 years that separated this initial formulation from the publication of his book, Laqueur lived through the experience of mourning. It led him to face, as he wrote, 'my own inability to articulate the attitudes towards death of people I knew and know intimately' and

thus 'it seemed futile to explore the subject systematically in those whom I would know considerably less well in the distant past' (p. xiii). At the level of a historian's life, this story exemplifies the dissociation of death studies from the history of mentalities, even though Laqueur interpreted the notion of 'attitudes' in a more individualised sense here than Michel Vovelle would. Hence, Laqueur decided to approach the topic of death 'through something more material, through what death leaves behind: through the dead body' (p. xiv). The history of cadaver disposal resists the narrative of denial and leads to new discoveries beyond its scope – so long as we accept that organising for the removal of bodies is different from denying them and the reality that they incarnate.[2]

This movement of critique of the death-denial thesis within the social sciences continues to grow, allowing for the development of original ideas and research projects. The discipline of death studies continues to distance itself from Gorer's and Ariès's theses and to explore new territory. Michel Vovelle's path as a historian who studied death exemplifies these changes. In 2008, he spoke about the tendencies he saw in contemporary funeral practices and in the relationship to death:

> In all this intertwining of attitudes, of forgotten gestures and of others that search for themselves, of sometimes clumsy claims, we distinguish a little more than the end of a traditional system. It is because, in this landscape of ruins, which is compensated clumsily by the productions and accessories of the privatized funeral, it would be unjust not to discern indications of a search for new words, gestures, and encounters. (Our translation, Vovelle, 2008, p. 78)

His stance seems to have been different a quarter of a century earlier. If one looks at the subjects which Vovelle did *not* discuss in his great book of 1983, one discovers indeed three major blind spots: cremation, autopsy and dissection. At the time, Vovelle (1983) had briefly mentioned cremation, but only to call it 'a variant among others' of the 'taboo on death' (p. 658). During the last decade and a half, those who have studied cremationist movements saw the inadequacy of understanding their advent as a sign of denial (Vovelle himself no longer does). Stephen Prothero (2001), for instance, claimed that the history of cremation in America was 'rooted, at least in part, in efforts by ordinary Americans to take back authority over the rites of death from professionals (undertakers and clergy included) and to reinvest those rites with meaning and purpose. Careful observers will not mistake that reinvestment with the demise of either religion or ritualization' (p. 12). Similarly, Lisa Ann Kazmier (2005) argued that the social transformations that accompanied the rise in cremations 'do imply at least a relative decline of religiosity or the alteration of spiritual values, but to characterise such developments as denial seems simplistic and wholly unsatisfactory [...] [T]he mere repetition of Gorer's claim compromises opportunities for analysis' (p. 3). Simone Ameskamp (2006) wrote for her part in 2006 that her doctoral dissertation contested 'the assumption that modernity implies the repression and denial of mortality' and that cremationists did not fear death but 'viewed it as a form of homecoming and abstract union with the universal' (p. iii).

Aside from cremation, Vovelle did not cover the history of legal autopsies, whose advent can hardly be understood as a form of death-denial. Much like cremation, the emergence of autopsies as a way of dealing with dead bodies testifies to the invention of new forms of cadaver disposal in times of urbanisation. Frédéric Chauvaud (2000), history professor at Poitiers University, and one of his students, Sandra Menenteau (2013), have explored since 2000 that dimension of the history of death. Bruno Bertherat (2002), former student of historian Alain Corbin, did so as well in his regrettably unpublished doctoral dissertation on

the 19th-century Paris morgue. They have demonstrated how the history of cadaver disposal can help historians focus on what societies do with the dead, rather than lamenting that the history of death has entered into a void. The autopsy that took shape in the modern era has a history of its own. In order to make sense, the death-denial thesis must, in turn, deny that history.

The same goes for another form of cadaver disposal that was systematised during the modern era: anatomical dissections. Vovelle did not cover their history, although they were practiced in several of the centuries which he studied. One may speculate that he did not do so as it would have been incoherent to give old cadaver disposal practices and newer ones the same truth value, while claiming that Western history has led to the denial of death. Other historians have studied the history of dissections, and 'denial' is not a useful concept for their understanding. Peter Linebaugh's (1975) essay *The Tyburn Riot Against the Surgeons*, published in the book *Albion's Fatal Tree* edited by Douglas Hay in 1975 provided an early example of such work. Before him, Michel Foucault (1963) had briefly spoken of dissection as part of his book *The Birth of the Clinic*. British historian Ruth Richardson (1987) also published an entire book on the history of dissection and body-snatching in graveyards in Great Britain, entitled *Death, Dissection, and the Destitute*. More recently, historian Michael Sappol (2002) published *A Traffic of Dead Bodies: Anatomy and Embodied Social Identity in Nineteenth-Century America* on the history of dissection in the United States. In French, Rafael Mandressi's (2003) book *Le regard de l'anatomiste. Dissections et invention du corps en Occident*, remains a reference on the history of dissection. They all provide example of scholarship on death which does not need to rely on a notion of denial.

Returning to contemporary scholarship, the collective book *Aux origines des cimetières contemporains* (Bertrand & Carol, 2016) is an excellent example of a concerted effort to inherit Vovelle's work and take it forward. The authors analyse the creation of the modern cemetery in Western Europe at the turn of the nineteenth century. Their focus is on funeral decrees issued by the state of France in the wake of the Revolution. Instead of insisting of the loss of a funerary world, they concentrate on the advent of a new model for body disposal. The book is a product of Aix-Marseille University, where Vovelle was a professor, and it is in line with his intellectual legacy.

All of these endeavours are original because they contest or simply do not need to base their analysis on any notion of death-denial. Their very existence and quality demonstrate that scholars of death studies can and perhaps should avoid assuming that Western history has led to the obliteration of death.

Persistence of the death-denial thesis

Yet, despite the many academic challenges to death-denial, the narrative still lives on. Its presence is particularly striking not only in a variety of associations and cultural events which claim to be confronting the great taboo of Western society, but also in sociological textbooks aimed at introducing the students to the sociology of death and dying. One such textbook is Michael Leming and George Dickinson's (2007) *Understanding Dying, Death, and Bereavement*, now at its eighth edition. Under the title 'contemporary attitudes toward death', the authors write that 'Americans are afraid of death, and seek to deny it' (Leming and Dickinson, 2007, p. 57). Evidence given to that effect is heterogeneous: the use of euphemisms, the taboo on conversation about death, the mattresses in-built in caskets,

externalising the care of the deceased to a professional, the lowering of the casket in the absence of the relatives, and cryonics. Moreover, while the popularity of life insurance policies and wills could demonstrate that Americans are quite accepting of death and prepare for it in advance, the authors claim these may actually be attempts to deny one's mortality by ensuring the permanence of one's wealth in the world of the living.

In 2003, Clifton Bryant, the creator of the journal *Sociological Symposium* whose issue on the sociology of death was discussed in the first part of our paper, edited the *Handbook of Death and Dying*. The volume, intended to be a comprehensive and inclusive compendium, contains 103 essays on the topic of death and dying, some of which argue that death continues to be denied in Western society. For example, in a chapter dedicated to 'Historical Changes in the Meaning of Death in the Western Tradition', largely indebted to Ariès's work, William Wood and John Williamson (2003) claim that death is hidden behind closed doors in the West, and that since death care is performed by medical practitioners, rituals of former periods 'fade into solitary and disconnected stories' (p. 14). They also maintain a certain scepticism towards the idea that a new acceptance of death may have been achieved in recent years through the resurgence of discussions about death and dying.

The contribution of social and clinical Psychologist Bert Hayslip (2003), 'Death Denial – Hiding and Camouflaging Death', also proceeds along similar lines. The author argues that societies can be classified as death denying, death defying, or death accepting, and that denial as a defence mechanism is manifested in: '(a) preventing death, (b) disposing of the dead (c) helping make sense of death and (d) endorsing socially sanctioned killing'. (p. 35). 'For example', he adds 'to the extent that persons believe that medical personnel can save lives, this represents a form of denial' (p. 35). The non-sequitur is self-evident: the belief that doctors can save patients from dying more or less prematurely from a certain condition does not imply believing that doctors can postpone or evade death indefinitely. Again, the use of euphemisms, the displacement of death from home to the hospital, embalming, the separation of churches from cemeteries, the avoidance of expressing grief in public are offered by Hayslip as evidence of denial.

New forms of the death-denial thesis are also gaining increasing traction in the field of psychology. The works of American social psychology professors Jeff Greenberg, Sheldon Solomon and Tom Pyszczynski (2015) are probably the most notable examples of this trend. The three authors developed, in a much-cited article in 1991, what they called the Terror Management Theory (TMT). The concept was elaborated in their many further publications, and is now at the centre of a growing scholarship. The basic assumption of the theory is borrowed from Ernest Becker. It states that cultures formed out of the human necessity to cope with the randomness of existence and with the consciousness that death is the inevitable endpoint. This assumption provides the basis for an explanatory model of social behaviour. Motivation of human action would reside in efforts to resist the weakening of values whose function is to shield us from the reality of death. This new psychological interpretation demonstrates the influence of Becker's thesis on the death-denying nature of human societies.

The reasons of the success and pervasiveness of the death-denial narrative, we believe, need to be looked for in its ideological dimension rather than in the sometimes dubious substance of its claims. While Cannadine (1981) is right in claiming that the narrative enlists nostalgia in its support, there is something more to it than a sheer longing for an idealised past.

Death-denial is a narrative of fall, a critique of a specific aspect of modernity which became popular in a time when modernity at large came under the scrutiny of social scientists and philosophers. In fact, exactly like critiques of modernity, the narrative of death denial mourns the loss of pre-modern symbolic structures, and the entrance in a dehumanising, mechanised, profit-oriented order. In particular, the denouncement of the loss of the rituals and religious beliefs which assumedly made death comprehensible and non-traumatic finds a parallel in the innumerable works written on the dissolution of ancient cosmologies which provided an orienting framework to the Western Man (see for example the work of Habermas, 1985/1990). Technology and capitalism feature prominently both in works concerned with death-denial and in critiques of modernity, as they are blamed for dehumanising life and death, sometimes even for reducing them to mere occasions for profit. Lyn Lofland (1978) and Kenneth Doka (2003) also made this case. In his contribution to the *Handbook of Death and Dying,* Doka (2003) postulates in fact that one of the reasons of the success of the Death Awareness movement was that its narrative coincided with that promoted by other activist groups in the 1960s, claiming rights and dignity for the dying, proclaiming the naturalness of death, and denouncing dehumanising technology. If we consider that, as mentioned in our previous article, Gorer and Ariès fashioned the notion of a contemporary denial of death and of its negative consequences *by denouncing it*, we can understand another reason for the longevity of the narrative, as well as the paradox at its core. As argued by Zimmermann (2007), death denial 'has been erected as an obstacle by the very discourse that continues to propose to tear it down and remains in this discourse because it is an integral component of it' (p. 310). Such a discourse can perpetuate itself only by asserting what it claims to be struggling against: despite its assumed goal of breaking the taboo on death, it *needs* death to be denied in order to exist.

In conclusion, can we still claim that Western societies deny death? Perhaps the question has lost of its meaning. Certainly, these claims are still well in use in many groups today. Amongst these we find those associated with the *Death Cafés* initiative elaborated by Swiss ethnologist Bernard Crettaz in 1999, with *Dying Matters* in the UK, or with the extremely popular *Order of the Good Death,* whose creator Caitlin Doughty is regularly featured in international media. But within academia, we suspect that many scholars would now agree that their work in death studies does not rely and indeed contests the assumption that we live in death-denying societies. We, amongst many, both consider our respective research in history and social anthropology to be focused on what the living have done with the dead, as opposed to what they should have done or did not do. If we are correct in guessing that many colleagues share a similar opinion, then death studies might now be at a turn.

Notes

1. See for instance: Jay Ruby (1999). The author nonetheless agrees, to an extent, with the idea of a public denial of death in 19th-century United States.
2. Ivan Cenzi (2016) adequately pointed out in a recent article that 'Regarding the Western taboo about death, much has been written on how its "social removal" happened approximately in conjunction with WWI and the institution of great modern hospitals; still it would be more correct to talk about a removal and medicalisation of the corpse. The subject of death, in fact, has been widely addressed throughout the Twentieth Century: a century which was heavily imbued with funeral meditations, on the account of its history of unprecedented violence.

What has vanished from our daily lives is rather the presence of the dead bodies and, most of all, putrefaction'.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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