Introduction. Corpses and mass violence: an inventory of the unthinkable

Élisabeth Anstett & Jean-Marc Dreyfus

Mass violence is one of the defining phenomena of the twentieth century, which some have even called the ‘century of genocides’.¹ Scarred by the Armenian genocide, the *Holodomor* in Ukraine, the Spanish Civil War, the Holocaust, the gulags and, more recently, the crimes against humanity committed in Bosnia, Europe alone offers a range of examples of such extreme events.² These outbreaks of mass violence particularly affected civilians, unlike most previous massacres, with the motivations behind them political, ideological, racial or religious, and fitted into a generalized background of violence and the construction of nation-states or territorial empires.³ Mass violence was also a symptom of new types of political regime, with no precedent in human history.⁴ Yet, in spite of their scale and variety, and in spite of their millions of victims, European massacres and genocides on their own do not allow us to draw a definitive typology of mass violence, for other continents have seen, and indeed are still witnessing, massacres which continually widen our notions of these human catastrophes.

Asia, for instance, has been scarred not only by the Great Chinese Famine, which, according to some estimates, claimed up to 40 million victims during the policy of the ‘Great Leap Forward’,⁵ but also by the Cambodian genocide, which resulted in 1.5 million deaths between 1975 and 1979,⁶ along with the mass violence committed in Indonesia under the Suharto regime, which has to be considered in terms of both its political and its ethnic character.⁷

Africa has suffered the Rwandan genocide, which claimed 800,000 victims over the course of just three months in 1994,⁸ and the sporadic yet recurring violence in Sudan since 1982, which has claimed over 2 million victims in total, many of them in Darfur,⁹ while specialists in this field find it difficult even to agree on what to call the constantly mutating cycle of violence which has claimed 4 million victims since 1994 in the Democratic Republic of Congo (formerly Zaire), and which has become far more than a simple aftershock from the Rwandan genocide. The continent of America has seen political ‘disappearances’ under Argentina’s military dictatorship,¹⁰ along with mass killings in Guatemala between 1981 and 1983,¹¹ and the successive waves of violence which have shaken Haiti since the beginning of the twentieth century. Taken together, these further genocides and massacres force us to consider the European experience in light of mass violence perpetrated across the globe throughout the twentieth century.

The social sciences, although somewhat slow to address the phenomenon of genocide, have recently brought a variety of new perspectives to the questions it poses. Academic studies of mass violence have a rather complex history, closely linked to general developments in the human sciences as well as the political contexts within which the research has been carried out. These studies have been strongly structured around the questions raised by the Holocaust, which they have placed in a wider comparative context in an attempt to define certain anthropological fundamentals and, where possible, constants. Along with comparative studies of mass violence,¹² a growing number of monographs¹³ have brought into focus the fact that while it has been possible to study some genocides soon after the event, other instances of mass violence have had to wait for a favourable political context to emerge, along with freer access to archives, before they could be documented. These studies draw on the approaches of such varied disciplines as law, history, political science and anthropology, and focus on questions as wide-ranging as the mechanisms of decision,¹⁴ the definition of victims,¹⁵ transitional justice¹⁶ and the memory of mass violence.¹⁷ Important contributions from the fields of law,¹⁸ history¹⁹ and anthropology²⁰ have together led to the establishment of a new disciplinary field, that of genocide studies, which has been consolidated through the creation of collaborative networks (the International Network of Genocide Scholars in Europe and the International Association of Genocide Scholars in the USA), academic publications (the journals *Holocaust and Genocide*

Studies, Journal of Genocide Research and Genocide Studies and Prevention) and annual conferences.

In spite of the large amount of work produced so far within this field – paradoxically even, given the importance of the body as a topic in the social sciences – the question of the body in relation to mass violence remains a largely unexplored theme. Over the last thirty years, studies centred on the body have evolved considerably, thanks to the growing importance in the English-speaking world of cultural studies, with its innovative view of the body as the meeting point of diverse social and cultural forces. This vision of the body as not only a resonant marker of identity on many levels, but also as the ultimate seat of affect, provides a solid starting point for a reading of human cultures as a coherent whole, whether as part of a literary, or biological or historical approach. The body, then, is a theme which not only runs across all the human sciences,²¹ but also possesses longstanding legitimacy and has recently seen an upsurge in interest in light of technological developments and the emergence of the concept of biopower.²²

Yet, while the body, when alive, is considered from almost every possible perspective by the social sciences, it has so far been paid virtually no attention once dead. Only archaeologists and anthropologists have sought to provide an account of the religious and political significance with which it is invested in various contexts.²³ Yet human remains constitute a grey area, or even a taboo, in the research on the body conducted in the human sciences. Studies on the subject are few²⁴ and virtually no work has been done on the presence of the body at the scenes of mass crime (with the exception of that done by Becker²⁵). Yet the fate of the body, and more particularly that of the corpse, in our view constitutes a fundamental key to understanding genocidal processes and the impact of mass violence on contemporary societies.

The study of how the dead body is treated can lead us to an understanding of the impact of mass violence on contemporary societies – from the moment of the infliction of death until the stage when the bodies of the victims are reinstated in a peaceful society. This belief has encouraged us to put in place a vast research programme, entitled ‘Corpses of Mass Violence and Genocide’, financed by a grant from the European Research Council (ERC) from July 2011.²⁶ To address the issue of the practical and symbolic treatment of corpses by societies affected by mass violence, we proposed to maintain a qualitative, comparative and multidisciplinary approach. The qualitative dimension enables us to draw

support from the documented analysis of a range of studies, each examining specific historical and cultural scenarios. These cases are, however, potentially so numerous that it seemed to us imperative at the start to limit ourselves to the contemporary period. Starting from research on mass violence in Europe (the Holocaust for Jean-Marc Dreyfus and the gulag for Élisabeth Anstett), it seemed to us necessary to engage in a comparative dialogue with specialists on mass crimes perpetrated elsewhere in the world, such as Rwanda,²⁷ Cambodia²⁸ and Argentina.²⁹ Moreover, in the knowledge that an approach within a single discipline would be insufficient to bring out all the issues pertaining to the fate of the corpses resulting from mass violence, and in light of the latter's complexity, we have decided upon a multidisciplinary approach. This involves a close dialogue between anthropology – whether social³⁰ or medico-legal³¹ – within the domain of violence and the following disciplines: history, which reconstructs the time and place of the atrocities;³² law, which was the first discipline to be engaged in a systemic analysis of mass crimes and to have endeavoured to establish a theoretical framework;³³ and political science, from the founding works of Hannah Arendt,³⁴ which brought some structure to the field, up to the studies conducted by Pierre Hassner³⁵ and Jacques Sémelin³⁶ on the genesis of extreme violence.

Anticipating the epistemological, methodological and ethical issues raised by our intellectual project, we held a two-day workshop in June 2011 to enable our team to draw an inventory of the conceptual and methodological tools available for addressing the corpse in mass violence, and thus to establish a panorama of ideas and approaches available to address the dead body in genocide scenarios. We had also to ask ourselves about the possibility of addressing these seemingly impossible aspects of the subject of corpses en masse, as well as working on the definition of a vocabulary – if not a grammar – of shared research. The result of this collective thinking both provides an inventory of the terms of art in our various disciplines and throws light on current conundrums and the genuine difficulties in grasping an extreme, but in our view essential, topic.

Therefore the contributions collected here address matters as diverse and crucial as the definition of our aims, the specificity of our methods and our respective ethical standpoints. To probe the intellectual framework existing today for the recognition of the object 'body/corpsé', we invited the political scientist Yehonatan Alsheh to examine the concept of biopower, in chapter 1. This

theory – developed by Michel Foucault – has in effect become the most commonly used tool of reference in the social and political sciences when it is necessary to address the relationships of power exerted on bodies and to study the punitive or disciplinary procedures deployed by states. In this seminal chapter, Alsheh shows the undeniable contribution and the limits of the biopower theory in the understanding of dead bodies *en masse*.

While the corpse continues to be a body, it is no less true that this singular object changes its status with its own change of state, and all the more readily so if it is found to be broken, denatured or destroyed (in whole or in part). Hence, it seemed to us essential to clarify the definition of these objects, the status (symbolic as well as juridical) that is accorded to them in our fields and the functions specifically assigned to them. The jurists Sévane Garibian and Caroline Fournet have tackled this task in chapters 2 and 3. The former is concerned with the possibility that law allows to embody the disappeared and the latter with the place international criminal law gives to the body. The criminologist Jon Shute in chapter 4 ponders the fact that criminology – the science of crime – has for so long ignored mass crime, even though the link between the corpse and the criminal is one of the fundamentals of the discipline. Alex Korb for his part has chosen a different approach in chapter 5, largely drawing on German archives to describe the various modalities of treatment of corpses in occupied Croatia, a country from 1941 a satellite state of the Reich and the theatre of particularly murderous inter-ethnic conflicts. He shows how working ideologies along with historical legacy and geographical landscapes determined the disposal of the bodies. As an extension to the criminological approach, the historian Jean-Marc Dreyfus examines in chapter 6 the simultaneously diplomatic and medico-legal nature of the activities of the French Search Commission for Corpses of Deportees in Germany. In its quest for the identification of the remains of French deportees throughout the territory of the former Reich, the Commission exhumed and identified thousands of corpses between 1946 and 1957, bringing a fund of unprecedented expertise into the areas of diplomacy and science.

It falls to the anthropologist to clarify in the final and frank analyses the ethical and epistemological difficulties that give rise to these singular objects of corpses *en masse*. The impacts for researchers and societies are considered: in Cambodia by Anne Yvonne Guillou (chapter 7), in Rwanda by Nigel Eltringham (chapter 8) and in the post-Soviet countries by Élisabeth Anstett

(chapter 9). In doing so, the researchers are led both to explain the scenarios in which the aim is to conceal or disclose the presence of corpses, and to account for their own standpoint at the close or remote distance they choose to maintain. They are also led to consider the psychological, affective or intimate resonances of a strange familiarity with human remains maintained through ethnography.

Thus, this volume aims to launch more than one title. For our study programme, we have built a vast team of researchers working in extremely diverse fields, epochs and scenarios; it seemed vital to make their works accessible through a specific editorial space. We wished to create within Manchester University Press a series of works analysing the fate of the corpses produced from mass violence and genocide. This book series will publish volumes arising from scientific expositions organized in the context of our research programme, standalone collected works and monographs on the subjects linked to the programme. To all of these, the present work aims to serve as an introduction, a programme framework and a methodological manifesto.

Notes

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- 2 M. Mazower, *Dark Continent: Europe's Twentieth Century* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1999).
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- 4 H. Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1951).
- 5 F. Dikötter, *Mao's Great Famine: The History of China's Most Devastating Catastrophe, 1958–1962* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2010).
- 6 B. Kiernan, *The Pol Pot Regime: Race, Power, and Genocide in Cambodia Under the Khmer Rouge, 1975–79* (Yale: Yale University Press, 1996).
- 7 R. Cribb (ed.), *The Indonesian Killings of 1965–1966: Studies from Java and Bali*, Monash Papers on Southeast Asia No. 21 (Clayton: Centre of Southeast Asian Studies, Monash University, 1990).
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- 13 For instance, R. J. Van Pelt, *The Case for Auschwitz: Evidence from the Irving Trial* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2002); N. Werth, *L'Ivrogne et la marchande de fleurs: autopsie d'un meurtre de masse 1937–1938* (Paris: Tallandier, 2009).
- 14 C. Browning, *The Origins of the Final Solution: The Evolution of Nazi Jewish Policy, September 1939–March 1942* (London: Arrow Books, 2005).
- 15 A. L. Hinton, *Annihilating Difference: The Anthropology of Genocide* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002); D. Bloxham, *Genocide on Trial: War Crimes Trials and the Formation of Holocaust History and Memory* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003).
- 16 P. Hazan, *Juger la guerre, juger l'histoire: du bon usage des commissions vérité et de la justice internationale* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2007); E. Barkan, *The Guilt of Nations: Restitution and Negotiating Historical Injustices* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000).
- 17 P. Gray & O. Kendrick (eds), *The Memory of Catastrophe* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2004).
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- 25 A. Becker, 'Exterminations: le corps et les camps', in G. Vigarello (ed.), *Histoire du corps. Volume 3: Les mutations du regard. Le XXe siècle* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 2006), pp. 321–39.
- 26 See the programme's website at www.corpsesofmassviolence.eu (accessed 27 March 2013).
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- 29 S. Garibian, 'Derecho a la verdad. El caso argentino', in R. C. Santiago & V. D. Carlos (eds), *Justicia de transición: el caso de España* (Barcelona: Institut Catala Internacional per la Pau, 2012).
- 30 Hinton & O'Neill, *Genocide, Truth, Memory and Representation*; Hinton, *Annihilating Difference*.
- 31 F. Etxeberria, L. H. Erlogorri & Antxon Bandres, *El cementerio de las botellas: enterramientos de presos republicanos en el monte Ezkaba (1942–1945)* (San Sebastian: Sociedad de Ciencias Aranzadi, 2011).
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- 34 Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*.
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