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Review: Better Off Dead

By Rachel Ariss

Katherine Verdery, The Political Lives of Dead Bodies: Reburial and Postsocialist Change. New York: Columbia University Press, 1999.

Linda Hogle, Recovering the Nation's Body: Cultural Memory, Medicine and Redemption. New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1999.

These two works reposition the dead in European political and cultural contexts. While they approach the dead from different perspectives - Verdery from the political and Hogle from the anthropological - both writers recognize, explain and analyze the role(s) of the dead, particularly in their materiality, in modernized national communities. Contemporary North American and European cultures have, over the past few decades, made significant efforts to ignore and/or disguise death, dying and the dead, through various tactics such as institutionalizing the elderly and the dying, using elaborate embalming processes to preserve the dead, abandoning social and public mourning and shunning the grief of the bereaved. This recent cultural avoidance of the dead has led historian Barbara Duden (1993: 9) to comment that: "Above all, there has never been a community that did not cohabit with its dead. But today, socially, the dead are no more. They are deceased. They are ontic has-beens."

Verdery and Hogle resituate specific communities in the context of their dead with strong, well-supported analyses, drawing readers into a world simultaneously within their personal grasp (do we not all have our dead?) and yet, particularly in contemporary mainstream Euro-American culture, beyond reach. Importantly, both writers emphasize the materiality of the dead in their efforts to culturally situate contemporary European uses of dead bodies. This emphasis is in profound contrast to the present and recent historical trend of ignoring death. This review will consider Verdery's approach to the political roles of the dead through reburial in postsocialist nations, especially Hungary and what was Yugoslavia, in concert with an explanation of Hogle's approach to the cultural (and, to an extent, political) understandings of the dead in organ transplantation

procedures in Germany. Verdery's analysis deals with the roles of the dead as once-specific persons who continue to have materiality through bones and corpses; Hogle's analysis focuses more directly on the materiality of dead bodies themselves and the proper place and cultural functioning of use of that materiality, with recognition of their once-personhood operating within debates surrounding use. Verdery asks specifically about the role of reburial of dead bodies in political change during the postsocialist upheaval in the Eastern bloc. Analysis of the political role(s) of the dead and their reburial is an immense topic in itself, as Verdery comments, requiring attention to "political symbolism; to death rituals and beliefs, such as ideas about what constitutes a 'proper burial'; to the connections between the particular corpses being manipulated and the wider national and international contexts of their manipulation; and to reassessing or rewriting the past and creating or retrieving 'memory'." (3) Verdery begins by illustrating concepts she uses to understand reburial, such as authority and the sacred, moral order and the reordering of time and space. She delimits the scope of her inquiry by dividing reburial of the dead into two groups: the named and famous, and the anonymous dead.

Verdery explains that her purpose for examining the political role of reburial is to enliven the study of political change in postsocialism:

Where do dead bodies figure in this? I believe they offer us some purchase on the cultural dimension, in the anthropological sense, of postsocialist politics.... They help us to see political transformation as something more than a technical process - of introducing democratic procedures and methods of electioneering, of forming political parties and nongovernmental organizations, and so on. The 'something more' includes meanings, feelings, the sacred, ideas of morality, the nonrational - all ingredients of 'legitimacy' or 'regime consolidation' (that dry phrase), yet far broader than what analyses employing these terms usually provide. Through dead bodies, I hope to show how we might think about politics, both as strategies and maneuvering and also as activity occurring within cultural systems (25).

For the most part, she succeeds in answering these questions. Hogle's purpose is both simpler and broader: "My purpose... is simply to show what is involved in converting human biological materials into usable therapeutic tools in the particular conditions of late twentieth-century Germany." (18) Her approach to this examination illuminates the cultural and political necessities, implications and debates of this conversion, as she:

... pay[s] particular attention to the way in which various meanings of the body affect and are affected by cultural, medical-technical, and legal practices. Such interactions unfold in unique ways in different settings, even within Euro-American environments that are often presumed to be homogeneous. That is, they can change according to the relation of the state and other authorities to individuals in society and through the addition of new technologies or modified views of old ones. They can also change through attempts to overlay religious, economic and political frames. The interplay between old and new, secular and

sacred, technical and cultural has profound implications in terms of who societies allow to make decisions about the rights and protections of bodies, what constitutes violation of or rightful access to useful resources, and how these resources are defined and valued for legal, regulatory, and commercial purposes (2).

Hogle divides her work into two parts. The first is a broad-ranging discussion of historical cultural meanings of the body in Germany, including its specific cultural construction under the Nazi regime as well as funerary and medical practices regarding bodies at death; the political implications of the rise of legal concepts of bodily integrity and how recent publicized uses of the body reveal both old and new conceptions of the relationships between the body, technology and the state. Set against this backdrop, the second part develops connections between the medical, technical and bureaucratic practices of human tissue procurement, including the interplay of international issues, infrastructure and local practices.

Several themes run through both works, all of which are based in the materiality of dead bodies through reburial or reclamation of body parts. Reanimation, regeneration and cultural/national identity and territoriality, are found in both authors' works and are two of the most recurrent themes. I will focus on these two. Both writers, as I explained above, address themes and issues beyond these. Importantly, Verdery addresses the reordering of space and time in worlds that have undergone dramatic, rapid changes. Hogle considers representations of values in various medical and legal protocols in the treatment of death and dead bodies, and the struggles between each set of values.

Reanimation and Regeneration

Verdery's argument is that the reburial of dead bodies reanimates, as well as legitimizes, new political regimes. Included in Verdery's initial sketch of the politics of reburial of the famous dead are the fates of various statues as symbols of particular famous person's bodies. While she acknowledges the differences between these representations of the dead and reburial, she explains that they do symbolize a specific person's body, and tearing down the statues reverses the timelessness that being concretized in a statue assigned to that body (5). This provides a broad parameter for her detailed discussion of the reburial of famous bodies.

The list of famous bodies being accorded reburial through the early 1990s in postsocialist Europe is astounding. Among the list of eighteen famous corpses who made international trips in the postsocialist era are composer Bela Bartok (from New York to Budapest) and composer/politician Ignacy Jan Paderewski (from Washington, D.C. to Warsaw)(13); Verdery also lists several important national figures who undertook journeys for reburial within their own countries (such as Hungary's communist prime minister in 1956, Imre Nagy), as well as some corpses who have made several trips at various points in history. While many were reburied as signs of renewed honour, some were demoted: "Communist mausoleums sent out eviction notices, as did the Kremlin Wall." (19)

The reanimating power of these corpses is largely in the injection of some

aspect of sacredness or quasi-religious meaning to the new political authority, as well as in the conflicts over them. Such conflicts can elevate, in some contexts, “politics” to “morality” or an expression of the “moral truth” of an historical event (38). Many of the returned and rehonoured dead were musicians and composers living in exile; some were participants in earlier political regimes, through diplomacy or journalism; others had royal connections. Reburial as political reanimation is especially effective in relation to the suppression of or denigration of religious activity in the Eastern Bloc, as Verdery points out: “A religious reburial nourished the dead person both with these religious associations and with the rejection of ‘atheist’ communism. Politics around a reburied corpse thus benefits from the aura of sanctity the corpse is presumed to bear, and from the implicit suggestion that a reburial (re)sacralizes the political order represented by those who carry it out.” (32)

Verdery’s primary example of political reanimation through reburial is the repatriation of Bishop Inochentie Micu from Rome to Blaj, Transylvania in present day Romania.

The story of Bishop Inochentie’s reburial encapsulates all of the themes in Verdery’s work, and I will explain his life and his historical political efforts in some detail here. Bishop Inochentie was born in 1692, during a power struggle between the Catholic Habsburgs and the mostly protestant nobles and szekles (populus). Both sides made efforts to religiously convert the Orthodox, Romanian-speaking people, despite their status as serfs, for political purposes. Verdery describes Inochentie’s life against a detailed explanation of this power struggle. Inochentie was born to one of the few Orthodox, Romanian-speaking free peasant families. He was educated by Jesuits, and eventually became a Greek Catholic bishop accepting the pope in Rome as the head of his church. Today, Bishop Inochentie is historically important to all Romanians, Catholic, Orthodox or atheist. He argued for an end to serfdom, which had been the Habsburg promise for conversion to Catholicism (62-3) and later, as this promise was not fulfilled, expanded his argument to political rights for all Romanians. For over forty years he petitioned the Habsburg court, beginning the Romanian national movement. Bishop Inochentie was exiled and fled to Rome in 1744. He continued his political activities and wrote often about returning home. He died in Rome and was buried there in 1768.

Bishop Inochentie’s 1997 reburial is largely about the Greek Catholic church’s attempts to strengthen its presence in the post-communist Romanian political landscape as a community deserving national recognition. Under communism, the Greek Catholic church had been dispossessed, its priests imprisoned and membership forcibly absorbed into the Orthodox, or official, church in 1948. Verdery’s analysis of the struggle between Greek Catholic and Orthodox clergy over Inochentie’s bones before his reburial in 1997 is compelling, and well-situated both in Romanian church politics and the massive efforts of various Christian (especially fundamentalist protestant) churches to evangelize the postsocialist world (80-82). Although Inochentie’s reburial was claimed as political reanimation for the Greek Catholic church, it can only be said to have been partially successful:

By monopolizing Inochentie, the Greek Catholics had narrowed his embrace. To rebury an ancestor is to create a community of mourners... . In reburying him as their particular ancestor, Greek Catholic churches limited the meaningful community of living and dead to their own congregation (90).

In this way, then, Bishop Inochentie's power to reanimate Romanian politics was tempered.

The roles dead bodies play in reanimation and regeneration in Hogle's work are quite different. As part of her backdrop to present day procurement and transplantation of human tissue, she explains historical European attitudes to death and dead bodies. Medieval northern Europeans believed that the soul did not fully leave the body until after it had decomposed. Corpses were understood as active – it was believed that a murder victim's body would bleed if the killer was present. German law allowed this as evidence to convict for murder until the late 1600s (32). Dead bodies were also seen as healing agents: the warm hand of a corpse could cure epilepsy, and human blood was a common curative (38). Some doctors requested judges to allow them to collect the blood of people about to be executed, for medicinal purposes. Analyzing these and other attitudes about dead bodies over time, Hogle theorizes:

I suggest that the unresolved questions of animation in the body allows for the possibility that a lingering vitality, when transferred to the user, had regeneration capability ... the value of the material as a curative agent may have depended more on the belief that organic human matter was still animate than on specific biological or medicinal properties of the tissue. In the process, the transfer of a human vital force could be seen as a parallel process to resurrection – the 'gift of life' as we say today (40).

Today, the reanimation potential of transplanted organs in Germany is treated as "natural." In contrast to the U.S., where drugs and invasive high tech means are used to sustain donor's bodies to preserve organs, German management of donor bodies is negligible and low tech: "Organs and tissues are maintained in a natural state meant to sustain the ability to animate and regenerate life in the recipient." (159) Further, Hogle explains that many Germans she interviewed refer to personhood as "cellular" (41) in that every part of the body is an aspect of one's personhood. For Hogle, the medieval idea of continued animation loses its "quaintness" where it intersects with ideas of bodily personhood. It is at this intersection that regeneration through post-mortem transplant can be promoted as a "gift," or decried as exploitative.

Animation and regeneration thus move their way through both the works of Verdery and Hogle as a bodily life force or as a method of community establishment. These are two very different manifestations of "reanimation." That they both find their sources in dead bodies, however, permits reading them together.

Identity and Territoriality

In both Verdery's and Hogle's books, the treatment and social position of dead bodies are claimed and interpreted as support for national and ethnic identity and re-identification projects. In Verdery's work, the identities claimed for the anonymous dead are, through the kinship claims of their living relatives, used to establish territorial rights. In Hogle's work, questions of identity are only loosely related to territoriality – they deepen in the face of what sort of state the new united Germany will become.

The struggle to establish the Greek Catholic community as an important national and patriotic Romanian identity centred on claims that Bishop Inochentie Micu was a Greek Catholic hero and manifested itself in who would have control over the reburial of his bones. In postsocialist Yugoslavia, the struggles regarding identity surround the reburial of anonymous dead found in mass graves: “they have reburied with much ceremony thousands of plain citizens found scattered in various unmarked burial sites – persons whose names are known only to their family, friends and neighbours.” (97) The social identification with those found in mass graves (initially along political lines, and later, along ethnic lines) is the first step towards asserting an ancestral and undeniable claim to territory. Verdery, in contrast to her chronological approach to the story of Bishop Inochentie, weaves the recent, the near and the far historical past into her analysis of the role of the anonymous dead in postcommunist Yugoslavia.

The anonymous dead play such a large role here, Verdery suggests, because they have remained a significant part of daily life for all of the ethnic communities: people have strong beliefs about proper burial and social connections to the dead and visiting grave sites is a common activity. With recent wealth in the area, ceremonies and buildings surrounding grave sites became more elaborate. Requirements to pay rent for grave sites to the state have been in place since the days of communist Yugoslavia; additionally, desecrating enemy graves has been a recurrent tactic since WWII (97). Finally, “it is also the land of political corpses without number, lying in limestone caves, mass graves and other sites all around the landscape ... the skeletal inhabitants of limestone caves were the first troops mobilized in the Yugoslav wars. They were mobilized for a campaign to revise recent history.” (98-9)

This revision was aimed at the massacres which had taken place on all political sides in WWII, public knowledge of which was suppressed under communism. The 1980s, with the weakening of Tito's regime, provided an opportunity for those who knew where their relatives were buried to exhume and properly bury their dead. The materiality of this process is emphasized in the way bones were removed, bagged and passed along lines of villagers, who were visibly moved by physical reconnection with long dead friends and relatives. Several such exhumations were televised. This emotional process was manipulated by nationalist politicians and the WWII political categories assigned to killers and victims devolved to ethnic categories with kinship as the thread connecting reburial with ethnically-based territorial claims:

... graves laid out a geography of territorial claims and of personal commitment to

those claims; for in these places 'our' dead were buried. Retrieving and reburying these nameless bones marked the territory claimed for a greater Serbia, one that found its dead in the soil of most other republics. We might say that these corpses assisted in reconfiguring space by etching new international borders into it with their newly dug graves (102).

Fighting in the late 1980s and 1990s between ethnic groups resulted in similar massacres and mass graves. Several of these have been opened and the victims reburied. Old martyrs and new echoed and reinforced the ethnic divisions and territorial complexities of these divisions in the reformulation of new states from post-communist Yugoslavia. For example, in the Dayton agreements, Muslims and Croats argued for continued access to their graves in organized Serb territory. Serbs, on the other hand, dug up their ancestors and took them away.

These reburials, while they re-establish community and launch territorial claims, also, Verdery argues, "*narrow and bound*" community. She comments that while "Bosnia's Muslims used to go to the burials of their Serb or Croat covillagers and vice versa, for instance, that is no longer possible. Burials bring people together, reminding them of the reasons for their collective presence – relatedness – but that relatedness has now become ethnically exclusive." (108) While the context and political effects are different, this recalls the particularizing of Bishop Inochentie as primarily a Greek Catholic rather than a Romanian or even global figure.

Verdery continues to explore the relationships between kinship with the ancestors and the territoriality of the new states, emphasizing how this reorders time as well as space. She asks readers to deepen their understandings of political and social conflict by engaging with the role of the dead:

In post-Yugoslavia, the terrible displacement of persons, the tortures and murders, the devastating inflation, and so on surely indicate that the cosmos is out of joint. Among the things people know that produce such misery are the vengeful souls of the improperly buried and of ancestral spirits inadequately tended. Without claiming that this interpretation 'explains' what is happening in Yugoslavia, I believe these ideas deepen our appreciation of its dead-body politics by exploring matters of affect (115).

Verdery's work has engaged with the role of the dead on several levels, providing both a deeper understanding of the territorial aspects of postsocialist politics and a broader perspective on political upheaval and change. Hogle's engagement with identity is found in the competing sets of values informing different approaches to legal and medical treatment of death and dead bodies. In the early 1990s, Germany was in a struggle to reidentify itself as a united country. What would a new Germany become, after the rapid dismantling of the political boundaries between West and East? Hogle analyses the new German

identity found in national debates over which values, regulations and practices should be put into place to govern post-mortem organ transplant.

This debate is haunted by the spectre of National Socialism. Throughout the 1920s, scientific metaphors were used to explain the disruption of German society, which was an immediate effect of WWI, as well as the longer term changes of industrialization and urbanization. Biological thought began to be applied to German society, rather than to individuals (47). Building, in part, on this, the Nazis promoted and established a vision of a healthy German society as a fit body. Individuals, therefore, must be healthy and fit in order to be part of this strong social body. Those who were disabled or chronically ill were seen as damaging the social body. Thus, these people were left to die, and later, “euthanized.” (49) Simultaneously, the individual body which was seen as healthy and fit for the social body was a “German” body. Jews, Gypsies, communists and homosexuals were all seen as unfit, and further, as contaminating. They, too, were segregated and programmatically killed. Hogle explains the connection between the social body and national identity:

The popular nationalist slogan *Blud und Boden* (blood and soil) strengthened the connection between German heredity and homeland-as-body. Biological metaphors were linked with notions of belonging and rootedness to German lands. In this way, racial hygiene became a material way of forging a national identity. Germanness was defined with medical criteria that excluded outsiders and ‘primordialized’ insiders (48).

Medical research was encouraged as part of the National Socialist program to improve the health of the social body. But this research was based in using the individual bodies seen as waste, living and dead, as experimental resources (49). Needless to say, there was no consent sought, no regard for risk to “subjects” and often, flimsy or absent scientific bases for very invasive and cruel experiments. Body parts were also used to make everything from soap to lampshades (54). Thus, national identity and the good of the social body are inevitably linked with inhumanity towards individual bodies in German history. Moreover, a significant part of this linkage is found through medical-scientific research and viewing dead bodies as “useful” objects.

Hogle discusses the immediate post-WWII reaction to the degradation of particular individual bodies as “unfit” for the German social body: the passing of the 1949 Basic Law, which protects personhood, physical well-being, bodily integrity and individual dignity. The values embodied in these laws have been strictly interpreted over time, resulting in, for example, very severe penalties for disturbing the dead, defacing grave sites or disrupting funerals and strict limits on abortion (61-2). This reflects a different German valuation of bodies: the dignity of individual bodies can never again be subject to the “health” of an imagined “social body.” Hogle comments: “In postwar laws, the body persists as a political icon, but now as a recovered body. It demonstrates the repentance of the state and the restitution of pre-Nazi protections.”(91) Both the Nazi regime and the 1949 Basic Law can be understood as illustrations of Verdery’s fundamental point: “political transformation is often symbolized through manipulating bodies.” (28) Thus, the debate over post-mortem transplants and the issues that

accompany it such as defining death (brain-death), how consent should be obtained, how the body is to be handled throughout and afterwards, are always informed by relatively recent, extreme abuses of individual bodies by the state. German identity is now found in restitution for the past, manifested in protecting the individual body from indignities.

Following this historical analysis of how dead bodies are treated and a discussion of recent legal approaches and debates surrounding post-mortem transplant, Hogle turns to the “elaborate medical and nonmedical infrastructures” (103) necessary to both procure organs and perform transplants. Her ethnographic work is detailed, including observation of organ procurement co-ordination, organ removal surgery and detailed interviews with transplant surgeons and organ procurement co-ordinators. She also discusses the organization and politics of Eurotransplant, the Europe-wide organ procurement co-ordination group. Hogle’s analysis here will be of interest to readers investigating the culture of organ transplant, German medical bureaucracies and politics, as well as medical-scientific cultures.

Questions of identity are raised in two areas: amalgamating East and West German transplant practices and construction of the identity of the donor.

Organ transplant was organized differently in West and East Germany. East Germany had a centralized system, while the West was organized regionally. East German law also gave physicians the right to decide whether or not to use bodies to supply organs – the families were not even informed of the use (69). While there was no law in West Germany, physicians generally asked families for permission to use organs. In amalgamating the two systems, West German practices dominated. Records show that the former West receives more organs from the former East than vice versa (118). Western surgeons complain that eastern organs and removal practices are poor, however, and sometimes refuse to take an organ based more on its region and clinic of origin, rather than on information regarding the donor or the organ itself (169). This echoes recent experiences of industrial production in the former East since amalgamation: the East is a marginalized supplier to a wealthy West (118-119).

Another interesting aspect of identity in transplantation is found in the contrast between German management of the donor between brain death and organ removal and American management of the donor. In America, the donor becomes constructed as a person: both the quality of the organs and the quality of the person as a donor are measured. Hospital forms for organ donation include questions about whether the deceased had been in jail or traveled outside the U.S. There is also a section on “social history” which Hogle found included comments such as “\$5,000 found in car,” and lengthy reconstructions of donor personality and family relationships including who visited at the hospital and how they behaved (146). Days of high tech management and organ testing may precede organ removal (158), and despite the initial construction of personhood, donors are referred to as “the heart” or “the kidneys” prior to organ removal (147). In contrast, the German system records minimal data about the deceased: name, age, sex, weight, size, and cause of death (153). Most organ removals take place within eight hours of declaration of brain death and there is very minimal organ testing,

technological management or handling of the donor body prior to organ removal (158).

The American connection between personhood and donation and the identification of donors as giving, caring persons who continued giving to others even in death, is absent in German post-mortem transplant rhetoric. Hogle explains:

Because there is only minimal contact with the body and little information collected about the donor, German donors never become known as individuals with histories. A donor simply never becomes a person. This is key because in Germany a person cannot be perceived to die in order for someone else to live. Thus, while the organ can “live on” as described in transplant rhetoric, the person must not (159-60).

Identification of the donor is circumscribed and prevented, then, by the identification of the German state with “stark images of power and inhumanity,” (187) particularly in connection with medical uses of bodies.

In both works dead bodies are critical vehicles for the expression of political identities and moral values. In Verdery’s work, rightful claims to territory are built on grave sites. Although territoriality does not figure as large in the identity-building aspects of Hogle’s work, territoriality lingers in definitions of which organs are “better” for transplant. The re-identification process brought about by the unification of the two Germanys necessarily continues repudiation of Nazi approaches to the nation as a “social body.” Germany was not understood as an integrated society until National Socialism - a time that most Germans wish had never happened - and any new nationalism under reunification must continue to repudiate the Nazi past (188).

Both Verdery and Hogle have engaged with a subject that is largely ignored and in some ways, almost taboo in large parts of Western (and Westernized) society: dead bodies. Using this lesser known pathway, both writers have asked about the place of the dead in specific communities and the meanings assigned to them. While this path diverges into different locations for the dead in these communities, Verdery and Hogle have described and analyzed these locations with skill and in depth. Neither author has been stopped by disciplinary boundaries around political science (Verdery) nor anthropology (Hogle), making both works accessible to diverse constituencies. Verdery’s work covers wider ground, emphasizing the role of the dead in providing insight into major world political events. While Hogle’s focus is somewhat narrower, it is nonetheless rich in its historical and current analysis of the cultural place of dead bodies in Germany. Nadia Seremetakis (1991: 14) has commented that the institutions of death, (either burial and reburial or organ donation procedures and practices) “function as a critical vantage point from which to view society.” Verdery and Hogle have, in their respective ways and towards their own ends, used this vantage point well.

Rachel Ariss received her S.J.D. from University of Toronto in 2001. She currently teaches in Women’s Studies at Lakehead University.

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