

# Introduction: coping with collective death

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It is difficult to imagine an area of social life that has not been affected by the SARS-CoV2 pandemic. Numerous assessments of this global health crisis have reported the multiple consequences of its impact in the various scenarios of daily life, and there is a relatively widespread consensus that we are living in a post-pandemic period. In this thematic issue of the *International Journal of Organisations*, we throw light on the impacts felt in a sector that was particularly affected during the evolution of the pandemic: namely, the funeral services industry. During the height of the pandemic, funeral services in Europe were under severe strain in terms of their capacity to manage the excess mortality resulting from coronavirus. This pressure exceeded the level of demand in other sectors, such as the health sector, whose efforts were recognised by the public with heartfelt tributes. This was not the case for funeral workers who, at the bottom of the health care chain (or, as Pascale Trompette and Victor Potier put it, “on the periphery of the medical system”), received little social recognition despite being considered essential workers. The fact that the profession, formerly known as undertaking but now called funeral work, carries the negative association identified in Everett Hughes’ classic text, “Good people and dirty work”, still heavily influences European public opinion.

The truth is that during the months of the global health crisis, there was a feeling that death was present in our daily lives. Perhaps it was no more than an illusion, a distorted image, undoubtedly intensified by the number of deaths per day (and quantified by the media at the end of the day), but it could not hide the fact that death is part of our daily lives. Norbert Elias would never have imagined that the society that had left the dying alone would now have to leave the dead alone as well.

The impact of coronavirus was also measured through (somewhat censored<sup>1</sup>) images, many of which were associated with death. The front pages of some newspapers became compendiums of obituaries,<sup>2</sup> dedicated firstly to public figures who had passed away, and later to other deceased people who were rescued from anonymity. A deep sense of the need to recognise the deceased was created, which eventually led to official tributes and the erecting of memorials to the victims.

This “familiarity with death” (Pentaris-Woodthorpe, 2021) did not necessarily translate into a greater recognition of the work of funeral services. The funeral industry sector (under the different names specific to each country<sup>3</sup>) had to put aside its usual business debates (in terms of the privatisation of funeral services, technological innovation, or individualised services, among others), in order to prioritise its role within the public health system, as the last link in the chain of management of human remains. All those dimensions of funeral services that allowed companies to respond to the growing individualisation of funeral services were relegated to the background. The spaces for bidding farewell to the deceased were closed and the time dedicated to mourning was accelerated by the need to manage the final destination of the corpses. In this context of apparent overflow and high demand (the setting up of improvised morgues – such as the one set up for a few weeks at the Palacio de Hielo in Madrid – had a deep impact on public opinion), a host of rumours were generated that took for granted that there were mass cremations of corpses (invoking old imagery regarding the epidemics that devastated Europe in medieval and modern times), confusion over the identity of corpses or funeral procedures that were contrary to the principles of certain religious minorities. Apart from a few very specific cases, none of this happened, and the funeral sector itself – through its own channels of communication and its business balance sheets – has sought to address the limited impact of the pandemic on its services.

Considering that the impact of an exceptional health situation such as this cannot be measured solely using this business logic, the articles contained in

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1 Photojournalism professionals criticised the “news blackout” due to the lack of images to describe what was happening. Ricardo García Vilanova and Gervasio Sánchez, in the prologue to the collective book *Pandemia. Miradas de una tragedia* (2021), criticised the fact that “some political representatives have justified censorship in the name of protecting ‘the right to dignity and privacy’ of the victims of the pandemic while demanding the resignation and submission of the media to the official script. [...] [This] has strengthened a cynical double standard whereby we are allowed to ignore our own dead while accepting without complaint those of other catastrophes and other places” (p. 13).

2 Like those eleven pages of obituaries published by *Eco di Bergamo* on 13 March 2020, or the front page of *The New York Times* on 24 May 2020, under the headline “US Deaths near 100,000. An Incalculable Loss”.

3 *Funeral service industry* in the United Kingdom, *pompes funèbres* in France, or *death care industry* in the United States of America.

this thematic issue of *International Journal of Organisations* are concerned with analysing the contexts in which funeral services operated in this situation of mass death. We add to the already substantial academic literature which analyses in detail all the measurable aspects of the impact of the pandemic on funeral services and the care of people who died in this exceptional health crisis. The authors participating in this special thematic issue have already published relevant analyses on the new funeral care scenarios that the pandemic has brought to light (Pentaris, 2021; Neimeyer-Pentaris, 2022; Weegen-Hoondert-Van der Heide-Timmermann, 2020; Hoondert, 2021; Moreras-Tarrés-Moral-Gil Tébar-Solé, 2020; Moreras, 2023).

As a suggestion for the thematic focus of this issue, we propose starting from the concept of collective death as developed by the French sociologist Gaëlle Clavandier (2004). This author uses the concept to understand and analyse the different tragic situations faced by a society, considering not only the high number of deaths that are generated (“mass death”), but especially the way in which these deaths were caused. The way in which societies respond to disasters and exceptional situations reveals how these effects are managed, whether by allocating resources to deal with the care of the deceased and their bodies in the first instance, or by organising the management of mourning and collective commemoration of the deceased. Clavandier dissects institutional responses to catastrophes as a way of analysing the public commemorations that follow social upheaval. The response to such tragic situations consists of four moments, in which the phase of *shock and impact* in the face of what has happened overwhelms and dislocates, since collective death is a source of social disorder, highlighting as it does the fragility of society.

Shock, violence, impact, and panic are immediate reactions to what has happened. The emotional phase barely allows the first estimates of the causes of the tragedy to be made. This is followed by the *rationalisation* phase in which the bureaucratic management of the response to what has happened dominates. This involves, first, “officially naming the drama”: accident, attack, natural disaster, etc., as a way of integrating the catastrophe into the language of the possible and opening the door to it being managed. And the second task in this phase is to quantify the effect of the tragedy, both in material terms and, above all, in terms of victims (which, as in the case of natural tragedies, cannot be recovered, so the term “missing” must be used, which further increases the sense of tragedy). This is the phase in which the first responses by public institutions are activated, opening the door to political debate (both in the criticism of the lack of prevention or rapid response, and in the appeal for solidarity regarding the victims and their families).

The third phase responds to this political cacophony, appealing to the need to *commemorate the memory of the victims*, and in this way placate all the political and media noise that interferes with the management of the tragedy. In addition to the recognition of the individual victims of this exceptional situation, some people have responded to the tragedy in a professional capacity. The remembrance of the deceased is mixed with the tribute to these “essential workers” (to use the expression used during the pandemic), as a way of overcoming the misfortune, and encouraging consolation from the response articulated by the social institutions. It is a time of homage that also serves to strengthen the bonds weakened by the impact of the tragedy, but also – in a much less prosaic way – to silence the noise of political debate.

This phase opens the way to the endpoint at which the tragedy is overcome by the construction of a memory which, according to Clavandier, leads progressively to its oblivion. To do this, some sort of ceremony needs to be organised to put an end to the period of trauma and facilitate “the return to a life perceived as normal” (Clavandier, *ibid.* p. 120) by opening the time of commemoration. Thus, mourning can end and the tragedy can be integrated into normal life. Despite this, commemoration does not always fit into everyday life, since the remembrance of what happened continues to arouse emotions. Clavandier leaves open the continuity of these annual celebrations of remembrance, which he understands to depend on the circumstances and political motivations for keeping the memory alive.<sup>4</sup>

Clavandier offers a global framework for how our societies cope with exceptional death, whether this be its causes, accumulation, or emotional impact. European funeral services were not the only ones to have to cope with this exceptionality, but the capacity of a sector that for decades had based its business on innovation (Beard-Burger, 2017) was severely tested in terms of the management and final destination of human remains, bereavement care and the commemoration of the deceased. Through the texts that form part of this special issue, we hope to provide an analysis that will serve to understand the effect on the funeral services industry of coping with collective death.

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<sup>4</sup> By way of an example that is close to home, just consider the sombre commemorations of the terrorist attacks in Madrid on 11 March 2004, and the response to the events in Barcelona and Cambrils on 17 August 2017.

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