

Fabien Provost, *Les mots de la morgue: La médecine légale en Inde du Nord* (Milan, Mimésis, 2021, 237 pp., €18.00 paperback).

The publication of *Les mots de la morgue: La médecine légale en Inde du Nord* [Mortuary Words: Forensic Medicine in Northern India] is a result of Fabien Provost's PhD in Social Anthropology on the topic of the practice of legal medicine in northern India. The primary aim of this study was to explain how, in practice, medicine provides courts with adapted evidence, but also to address this issue by defining the transformations undertaken by medical practice once assigned a forensic role, their final objective being the administration of justice. As Provost explains further, throughout a year of participant observation at three northern Indian morgues, he mainly focused his attention on the process of report writing, simultaneously considering the practice of forensic medicine as an administrative procedure, a form of reasoning and a linguistic activity.

The first chapter examines the different professional roles fulfilled by secretaries, morgue attendants and medical examiners, exposing the formal obligations, implied expectations, rules and interpretations that structure these positions. Secretaries register new cases on administrative forms and manage the flow of bodies and visitors (police, families), guaranteeing the physical and bureaucratic separation between examiners and those who could potentially exert influence on the medical examiners. Morgue attendants, whose job descriptions are more often than not vague, clean and prepare the tools and the autopsy room, but are also involved directly in performing the autopsies and therefore directly weigh into the medical expertise by describing each case to the medical examiner. As for the medical examiner, his primary role consists in building a narrative around the observations made on the bodies, which implies a comprehension of the specific case context. Do, then, the 'sociobiological' (p. 58) observations corroborate (or not) the police narrative? Each of these roles seems indeed to have a common goal of reducing potential biases in their work, notably, preventing corruption in the Indian context and protecting their professional authority and admissibility in court.

Chapters 2 to 4 focus mainly on the differences between the rationale of forensic medicine and that of healthcare. Forensic medicine uses terms commonly employed

in healthcare, but with additional precision to serve a legal purpose. Furthermore, besides fluency in forensic glossaries, the author identifies 'communicative competence' (p. 66) as an essential skill required of a medical examiner, namely, the ability to know how and when to correctly use these terms in an expert report. An aspect of the work that the author discusses through the study of cases is counter-expertise, where he demonstrates how communicative competence allows the examiner to spot discrepancies and correct observations so as to make them meet the criteria of forensic validity. Strategies involve prioritising probable causes of death to prevent negative autopsies and proposing simple explanations that would prove reliable to intentionality in court. Moreover, this competence confers examiners with rhetorical capabilities and discretionary power over cases: influencing the legal interpretation of cases, protecting personal reputation, etc. In chapter 4, the author also gives a detailed analysis of how clinical and biological descriptions can convey legal meaning and influence the subsequent interpretation of evidence. Borrowing from the linguist John Gumperz, Provost indeed notes the presence of 'amplifiers' that serve as subtle contextualisation cues such as '*could be possible*', '*cannot be ruled out*', that emphasise the relevance of some elements over others for the investigation (p. 145).

The fifth and sixth chapters delve into the complex issues of forensic reports *falsification* in the Indian context. Here Provost investigates corruption and provides detailed accounts of ethical matters and moral dilemmas in specific cases. In India, with bribery and regular intimidation by the police, on the one hand, and the need to unravel falsified reports, on the other hand, suspicion of corruption weighs upon examiners and workers at the morgue as a substantial systemic constraint. Chapter 5 details how medical examiners contend with this situation and maintain their professional independence through the resourceful use of language. And in chapter 6, the author questions cases in which the proper procedures are at odds with the medical examiners' values and moral judgement. Relating to issues of legal pluralism, the author depicts how empathy and moral judgement can result in the falsification of reports. Most importantly, Provost shows how these initiatives are not solely individual but influenced by social norms and upheld by an unwritten approbation of the professional community, who have developed alternative procedures that conform to collective ethical sensibilities.

To conclude, *Les mots de la morgue* [Mortuary Words] is engaging and thought provoking from the standpoint of social anthropology and forensics alike. Although highly regulated by a double normativity (science and law), the close observation of forensic medicine *in practice*, as by Provost in India or Stefan Timmermans in the United States,¹ shows how important it is to always consider the activities according to their actors' intentions and context. What may seem at first glance to be purely technical and structured by strict procedures is, in practice, shaped by various tactics of ruse and 'poaching', just like everyday life.² And while the study focuses on the Indian context, understanding the linguistic operations, their subtleties, strength, weakness and role is crucial in assessing how, when and why forensic expertise operates or not. Lastly, issues of standardised, official procedures and their conflict

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with socially normed moral judgement are common to every context (medico-legal, judicial, humanitarian) and at different levels (local, national, international).

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Christos Lynteris and Nicholas H. A. Evans, *Histories of Post-Mortem Contagion: Infectious Corpses and Contested Burials* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2018, 256 pp., £74.99 paperback).

I read this work during a sanitary crisis caused by the new coronavirus in a place where the impacts of the fear of infected bodies and of illegalities and immoralities in burials have been particularly alarming – Brazil. I had the misfortune of losing my father and other relatives to COVID-19 and personally feeling the impacts of a rushed funeral, with a sealed coffin and without the welcoming presence of family members due to sanitary measures concerned with the danger of the disease being spread by contagious bodies.

Although it is not about the new coronavirus pandemic, the book edited by Christos Lynteris and Nicholas Evans is an essential and powerful work of compilation of diverse experiences related to epidemics, body dumping, fear of contamination, hasty burials, isolation, plague riots, all themes of the greatest relevance today. The main purpose of this book is to present a historical approach to stigmas, myths, narratives and practices related to contaminated bodies resulting from various epidemics that occurred in different parts of the world at different historical moments. The issue that touches all the chapters is centred on the management of bodies, with the consequent disputes and conflicts.

The possibility of recovering such detailed histories of the social impacts of these epidemic moments, in different historical and geographical times and places, allows the accumulation of important expertise for a more global and comparative view of a problem that today has taken on exceptionally important contours. I believe that, despite the enormity of the social, political, economic and cultural problems generated by the new coronavirus pandemic, the issue of body disposal has been in the spotlight.

The bio-history of epidemics such as Ebola, AIDS, typhoid fever, Black Death, influenza, cholera and smallpox, analysed in this book in its different aspects, offers a rich framework of knowledge that is still not easily accessible to the general public. A sociohistorical vision of epidemic crisis is important so that the moral, psychological and cultural violence generated by the mismanagement of bodies can be avoided.

The book would already have its importance guaranteed even before the current pandemic. However, it will inevitably provoke some associations for readers. For example, Joëlle Rollo-Koster, by showing the impacts of the arrival of the Black Death on burial practices and funerary rituals, even on the pope's funeral, makes us reflect on the profound changes in rituals and funeral practices, following the coronavirus pandemic, for all social strata. Samuel Cohn Jr in chapter 2, which reflects

on the role of social differences and political oppression in the emergence of cholera riots in the 1830s, reminds us of the numerous cases of contested burials, especially in Latin America. Rumours of missing bodies, altered death certificates and false burials were frequent throughout 2020. Noticing other parallels, it seems that in several narratives, especially in countries where denialism has played an important role, death from coronavirus was associated with old age, weakness or the existence of comorbidities, connections that can be seen with the association between typhoid fever and masculinity discussed by Steere-Williams in the chapter 3.

As an eminently economic issue, Latin American countries also dealt with body-dumping problems during the coronavirus pandemic, as Christos Lynteris reports, albeit in another context. The cultural, geopolitical and social elements surrounding the disposal of bodies in colonial Hong Kong are brilliantly analysed by the author.

During the twenty-first century, in an age of rapid communication and social networks, Michael Anton Budd's reflections on postcards, personal snapshots, micrographs and photojournalism portraying bodies of the human victims of wars, plagues and famines between the years 1913 and 1923 remain current.

In chapter 6, Lizzie Oliver introduces the psychologically traumatising experience of isolation due to cholera and the search for reconfiguration of emotional support with the emergence of 'communities of contagion' in South-East Asian camps. Chapter 7 takes me back to the tragedy of plagues pit and mass graves, which suggests the importance of Engelman's analysis of the value of bio-history archives.

These are just a few examples of how the book's historical approach is both very current and relevant. Using different theoretical and methodological lenses, the authors seek to understand how we might define the epidemic corpse and what its role might be in specific cultural settings. Regardless of these parallels, the work has merit in itself. It is written in a language accessible to all audiences and achieves the goal of the series *Medicine and Biomedical Sciences in Modern History* to cut across conventional academic boundaries through stimulating interdisciplinary approaches. Through the story of post-mortem contagion, it manages to show the relationships between medicine and social, political and cultural structures which mutually constitute and influence each other through the various moments of plague outbreak.

What most caught my attention in reading this book was the sensitive view that epidemics should not just be seen as destruction, death and fear. They must also be understood as moments of creation and solidarity. This book definitely held my interest.

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Notes

- 1 Stefan Timmermans, *Postmortem: How Medical Examiners Explain Suspicious Deaths* (Chicago, Chicago University Press, 2006).
- 2 Michel de Certeau, *L'invention du quotidien: 1. Arts de faire* (Paris, Gallimard, 1990).