

Review of *Sociology of Death and the American Indian*

John A. Bernau

2024

Contemporary Sociology 53(3): 242-243. ¹

Work reviewed: Cox, Gerry R. 2022. *Sociology of Death and the American Indian*. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books.

Gerry Cox has long been a prominent figure in the sociology of death and dying. As he notes in the preface, he received his masters in 1966 and PhD in 1975, which positioned his professional career right at the center of the thanatology boom of the late 1960s and through the 1970s. In the intervening fifty years, he has conducted research on trauma, bereavement, grief, and resilience. Recently, he co-edited the *Handbook of the Sociology of Death, Grief, and Bereavement* with Neil Thompson (2017), and co-authored a textbook, *Death and Dying: Sociological Perspectives*, also with Neil Thompson (2020).

I mention all of this not as the usual fanfare to announce the author's latest great achievement, but rather to frame my surprise in reading what is quite a strange book.

Let me start on a positive note. The greatest strength of this book is in Part 3 where the author provides an extremely detailed ethnography, oral history, and analysis of death, dying, and end-of-life practices in each of sixteen American Indian communities: Anasazi, Aztec, Maya, Mounds Builders, Dine / Navajo, Inde / Apache, Tohono O'odham, Hopi, Lakota, Blackfeet, Cheyenne, Shawnee, Potawatomi, Ojibwe / Anishinabe / Chippewa, Shoshone, and Stockbridge-Munsee. Most of these communities are given a full chapter of exposition on their respective disposal and bereavement practices. When available, the author often draws extensively on first-hand accounts, and

¹ <https://doi.org/10.1177/00943061241240882m>

interview transcripts, most of which are taken directly from his previous work (Cox 2015), including a 26-page excerpt in chapter 22.

I was not familiar with any of this material on American Indian practices prior to reading, and the author is clearly well-versed in the contours of these indigenous communities (see *ibid.*). I appreciated the author's careful use and analysis of terms. He includes a section on the decision to use "American Indian" over "Native American", and the inherent problem of using tribal names that often originated from outside the tribes themselves. Especially given the history of "American Indian Cultural Denigration" (the title of Chapter 6), the collection and description of these sacred practices in one volume is bound to be of great value to scholars interested in American Indian religion and cultural practices.

So, Part 3 is great. If these 160 pages were published as a slim descriptive volume on "Disposal and Bereavement Practices of the American Indian" it would be easy to recommend. But this material is flanked by Parts 1 and 2: 150 pages of meandering, repetitive, outdated prose that is peppered with sweeping normative statements that are both odd and unnecessary. This material is given a 30-page reprise in Part 4 to close out the book.

First, the author spends a considerable amount of time trying on different definitions of sociology. The author nods to sociology as "the scientific study of social behavior" (p.2), its "attempts to develop causal principles" (p.2), and "make predictions about future behavior" (p.2). All fine so far—though the book itself develops no causal principles nor predictions. The author then proceeds with "Sociology is the study of human social activity from a scientific perspective. The social life of human activity is what sociologists study. Sociology is the study of choice making" (p.3). This is followed by another half-dozen attempts to define the discipline, including this: "The sociology of death and dying is rewarding, intellectually stimulating, and definitely sociological" (p.22). The sociology of death is definitely sociological? I understand that our discipline has no historical consensus on methods nor subject matter, but this disciplinary soul-searching is distracting and confusing.

Second, having evoked the great sociological tradition (in all its many forms), the author fails to engage with any recent substantive concept or framework. In a section titled "Sociological concepts in dying and death" (in a chapter titled "Why a sociology of dying and death?"), the author mentions Thomas's definition of the situation (circa 1928), Merton's self-fulfilling prophecy (coined circa 1940), and ends with a broad statement about how our attitudes come from the groups of which we are a part. This weak an-

swer to the chapter's titular question is all the stranger given the author's previous (and much stronger) article championing the field (Thompson et al. 2016).

Similarly, throughout the book the author neglects nearly sixty years of research on the sociology of death and dying – much of which he himself has contributed to. After mentioning Feifel, Kübler-Ross, and Saunders in the 1950s and 1960s, he claims: "The literature of death and dying has generally paid little or no attention to the wider social factors or to the role of the community" (p.21) and skips straight to how COVID-19 is bringing the discussion of a sociology of death to the public once again. I know it's common fare for reviews to gripe about works cited or left uncited, but with only four citations to scholarship on death and dying from the last twenty years, readers should know that this book is far from up to date.

The rest of these sections are littered with broad, normative statements that, if not wholly disagreeable, certainly strike this reader as odd: "Wan-nabe American Indians have done enough damage" (p.xii); "Power does not mean domination over others as it seems to be in the White world" (p.4); "It is fairly well documented that Whites killed more Indians than Indians killed Whites" (p.15, no citation); "If you attend Mass daily...to get a reward when you die, then you have a negative attitude toward dying and death. You should practice your religion because it makes your life better, not because of fear of what will happen when you die" (p.20); "As a non-Indian, as you age, you also need to find meaning and purpose in your life" (p.325).

These are paired with questionable generalizations about American Indian culture, despite the author's earlier warnings not to treat this diverse people as homogeneous: "American Indians live for today rather than focusing upon the future" (p.17); "Compassion is valued in American Indian societies" (p.17); and this passage: "Perhaps a major reason for the European dismissal of the stories of the American Indians is that Europeans telling stories often embellish or change stories as they wish. American Indians have always told their stories with great concern for keeping the details consistent over time" (p.11). The author explicitly tries to avoid "a highly technical style" of writing, but these odd phrases are distracting and poorly supported.

Lastly, the book suffers from embarrassing repetitions and copyediting mistakes, including attributing *The Old Man and the Sea* to Steinbeck, not Hemingway (p.29), and an entire paragraph repeated verbatim on pages 22, 27, and 321 ("The diversity within the various sociological approaches facilitates critical thinking..."). These kinds of mistakes almost reflect worse on the press and its copyeditors than the author, but hurt the book regardless.

Readers interested in a contemporary introduction to the sociology of death should look elsewhere, maybe even the author's other works. Readers looking for first-hand accounts of various American Indian burial practices should read Part 3 of this book.

References

- Cox, Gerry R. (2015). *Sociology of the American Indian*. Lewiston, New York: The Edwin Mellen Press.
- Cox, Gerry R. and Neil Thompson, eds. (2017). *Handbook of the Sociology of Death, Grief, and Bereavement: A Guide to Theory and Practice*. New York: Routledge.
- (2020). *Death and Dying*. New York: Routledge.
- Thompson, Neil et al. (2016). “The Case for a Sociology of Dying, Death, and Bereavement”. *Death Studies* 40.3, pp. 172–181.