



# Hans Ruin: Being with the Dead—Burial, ancestral politics, and the roots of historical consciousness

Ekkehard Coenen<sup>1</sup>

Accepted: 24 October 2020 / Published online: 11 November 2020  
© The Author(s) 2020

How can society be thought of as something in which the living and the dead interact throughout history? In *Being with the Dead. Burial, Ancestral Politics, and the Roots of Historical Consciousness*, Hans Ruin turns to the relationship between the living and the dead as well as ‘historical consciousness’. He is referring to the expression ‘being with the dead’ (*Mitsein mit dem Toten*). Rather en passant, Martin Heidegger (1962: 282) shaped this existential-ontological term, which so far has hardly received any consideration. But for Ruin, it now forms the starting point for his “expanded phenomenological social ontology” (p. XI). By illuminating history and historical consciousness with the category ‘being with the dead,’ he gains remarkable insights into the meaning of ancestry. Concerning ‘necropolitics,’ Ruin shows that the political space includes the living as well as the dead and how they constitute it. The foci of his considerations are the human sciences, above all sociology, anthropology, archaeology, philology and history. Ruin’s book aims at a “metacritical thanatology,” which he elaborates as “an exploration of the social ontology of being with the dead mediated through critical analyses of the human-historical sciences themselves” (p. XII). As a result, in a total of seven chapters, he succeeds astonishingly in emphasizing the political and ethical importance of a scientific gaze that cultivates the interaction of the living and the dead.

In Chapter 1, Ruin outlines the philosophical-phenomenological framework of his investigation. For this purpose, he first has a focus on Jan Patočka’s unfinished remarks on a “Phenomenology of Life after Death” (1995). For Patočka, the question arose as how one can speak of life after death in phenomenology without assuming a ‘substantial carrier,’ such as a ‘soul’ or a ‘spirit’. How can phenomenologists stay with the things themselves in their immediate givenness and at the same time speak of the non-existence of the dead? Central to this is the “*incorporation of the dead in and by the living*” (p. 17). The dead do not merely become non-beings, but remain in the memories of the living – in the form of a “*positive continuation of life*” (p. 17). Ruin then asks, what it means that the departed live on in our memory.

---

✉ Ekkehard Coenen  
ekkehard.coenen@uni-weimar.de

<sup>1</sup> Bauhaus-Universität Weimar, Weimar, Germany

Here, the concept of ‘the phantom’ (*le fantôme*) is central, which was elaborated by Jacques Derrida in *Specters of Marx* (1994). Learning to live includes not only learning to exist between life and death but also learning to live with the dead. The ‘phantomatic’ describes this existential in-between. It represents a phenomenological category that is “designating a mode of being shared between the living and the dead” (p. 19). Ruin also refers to Emmanuel Levinas (2000), for whom burials are an act of caring for the dead. In these mortuary rituals, the bereaved integrate the deceased into their community. It is precisely the dealing with the dead that reveals personal finitude and makes possible the thinking about the infinite. These considerations lead Ruin to his conclusion that a phenomenology devoted to the relationship with the dead must overcome the separation between life and death. It has to illuminate the “ontological shadow zone” (p. 20).

For Derrida and Levinas, the reference point for thinking about mortality is Heidegger. At the same time, they turn against Heidegger critically, accusing him of paying no heed to the revenant and mourning. Ruin starts here with a re-reading of *Being and Time*. His aim is “to let their criticism resonate in relation to the question of historicity as the existential foundation of history and historical awareness” (p. 24). In a detailed reconstruction of the central thoughts on the dead, Ruin shows that Heidegger already addresses the insecure sociality, which is also discussed by Patočka, Derrida and Levinas. Although the criticism of Heidegger is justified, he still comes to the same phenomena that Derrida later referred to as ‘spectral existence’. For Heidegger, the dead are not just objects of concern for the living. Instead, they have a particular mode of being. Therefore, Heidegger even introduces some new phenomenological concepts that have parallels in Patočka’s and Derrida’s analyses – the ‘still-remaining’ (*noch-verbleibendes*) and the ‘un-living’ (*un-lebendiges*). History is confronted with the problem of how to understand the span between life and death. It is a category of the living, and its sources are the dead. History, tradition and collective memory are on the one hand constituted by freedom and fate, but on the other hand, they are always connected with those who went before. According to Ruin, the category of ‘being with the dead’ invites us “to think the bond between the dead and the living beyond the standard socioanthropological and psychological framework” (p. 39). Because this would not only put people “before a choice of mourning or no mourning or between ghosts and no ghosts, but at the original site of its ontological destiny, as a being with the dead” (p. 39).

Chapter 2 deals with the social meaning of burials. Specifically, it is about a critical-philosophical reconstruction of Robert Hertz’s “A Contribution to the Study of the Collective Representation of Death” (1960), which is now a canonical text within the death studies. It is Ruin’s goal to “explore the inner continuity between speculative idealism and sociology/anthropology on the topic of death” (p. 44). A detailed presentation of Hertz’s argument leads him to emphasize the core concept of the so-called ‘double’ or ‘second burial’. Here, the connection between the living and the dead is symbolized and negotiated primarily through the care of the bones. Following the considerations of Emile Durkheim, who places the general above the singular, Hertz concludes that funerals are not about death, but about life. After all, every burial is a liminal rite, a collective action through which the community heals itself after the loss of one of its members. Using the example of an obituary

by Marcel Mauss, which is dedicated to those members of the journal *L'Année Sociologique* who died in the First World War, Ruin shows that it seems too easy to understand burials as “rites de passage” (Van Gennep 1960) and resource of social healing among the living. Instead, he refers to the importance of the “spectral ‘community,’” because “the rituals are performed with and for the dead themselves” (p. 60). Against this background, burials form “a testing ground for what sociology seeks to contain and master in its conceptualization of the social as both comprising and not comprising the dead” (p. 61). Mortuary cultures constitute an “expanded understanding of society” (p. 58), which consists not only of the living but also of the dead.

Chapter 3 is devoted to the relationship between ancestry and the human-historical sciences. Ruin notes that ancestor worship has long been seen in connection with religion. For him, it is essential to detach ancestor worship from this close connection to religion and to locate it in “the more general necropolitical and social ontological domain of being with the dead” (p. 66). Thus, the central meaning of the phenomena of ancestor worship and “an expanded sense of historical existence and belonging” (p. 66) can be worked out. Based on the history of the human-historical perspective on ancestry, Ruin works out a bias that has become entrenched in theoretical thinking about the dead. The human sciences tended to locate the different mortuary cultures and communication with the dead on a “lower (religious-superstitious) level”. At the same time, “the secular-theoretical compartment and its commitment to life” (p. 63) were rated as progress. As a result, the colonial distinction between civilization and savagery was sometimes negotiated as a “politics of ghosts” (p. 10). While for the human-historical sciences, ancestry initially represented “the negative other of historical consciousness itself” (p. 67), it later appeared as “the positive traditionality of the other” (p. 67). But throughout this development, a European ‘culture of spirits’ was considered more progressive than an African ‘culture of ghosts,’ as Ruin shows by using the example of Hegel’s *The Philosophy of History* (1956: 91–99). This leads Ruin to a transcultural understanding of ancestry as a general dimension of being with the dead. He points out that every society has developed practices to live with its dead. In this respect, the human sciences can “see themselves not just as the liberated descendants of earlier ancient and primitive cults of the dead” (p. 83). Instead, they are also “practices that in increasingly sophisticated ways continue to cultivate modes of living with the dead” (p. 83). Consequently, historical research “is not located outside the ethical-political space of ancestry” (p. 83).

In Chapter 4, Ruin turns to the topic of necropolitics by using examples of various political burials and reburials. He emphasizes that it is difficult for the so-called ‘standard sociology’ to include not only the living but also the dead. He attests to the social scientists and anthropologists that they would too carelessly use explanatory models from ancient and primitive layers of human religious sensibility. Thereby, they seek to challenge Max Weber’s idea of disenchantment and to introduce the ‘agency,’ ‘work,’ ‘power’ or even the ‘intentionality’ of the dead. In these concepts, Ruin sees a confirmation of the distinction “again between superstitious irrationality and philosophical rationality” (p. 93). But instead of giving space to re-enchanted sociology, it is Ruin’s concern, “to explore sociality as an ontological domain that

comprises both the living and the dead” (p. 88). The fact that this has hardly taken place so far is because the sociological theory has conceived the culture of death as a religious topic and thus as an object of the history of religion and cultural anthropology. ‘Spectrality’ would not be part of sociology, since it presumably only occurs in the imaginations and interactions of the living. But precisely because sociology defines the social world as a constructed space of social meaning and communication, it should be “a world consisting of both the living *and* the dead” (p. 97). Such an understanding opens up, in particular, the theory of history to “a space of life with the dead” (p. 107), which is both ethically and politically controversial. Above all, the bodies of the dead are to be understood as “placeholders and concretizations of time” (p. 107), since the care for the bones and their (re-)burials constitutes the space of the living.

Chapter 5 focuses on that theoretical discipline which has come closest to the grave: archaeology. Ruin states that there is no other discipline that “has exposed the ontological-ethical tensions of the human-historical sciences in the relation to the dead more than archaeology” (p. 114). Finally, on the one hand, it tries to create the life and meaning of the deceased. On the other hand, its interest in knowledge leads to a reification of the dead. Archaeology is the science that has shown people that they are those beings who are able to symbolize. Consequently, Ruin turns to the connection between symbol and death. He notes that the origin of burials is closely linked to the emergence of symbolization and conceptualization. Because “the question of *when* the human being becomes recognizable before and to itself is somehow inextricably connected to *when it sees itself as able to represent the other in and beyond death*” (p. 127). Archaeologists are actors who exert an influence on the production of pastness at the sites. It is the archaeological actions through which “bones begin to circulate again with the explicit purpose of entering into a relation with the ancient dead” (p. 135). Thereby, the archaeological treatment of bones differed for a long time due to the assumption that “certain dead were *us* and certain dead were *others*” (p. 136). It was not until the 1970s that the descendants of those, whose bones were collected, woke archaeology up to reinvent itself with the help of the rational-philosophical discourse of rights of dead. After all, archaeology found itself both inside and outside the tomb. On the one hand, it was an observer of the sites and, on the other hand, one of their most important necropolitical actors.

Chapter 6 begins with a detailed re-reading of Odysseus’ Journey into the Underworld and his encounter with the Sirens, intending to shed light on the relationship between history and interaction and communication with the dead. To get to Hades, Odysseus travels through time and space. Once there, he wants to bring the voices of the deceased back to the living. His confrontations with those having-been and the sirens are both alluring and dangerous. Ruin uses this excerpt from the *Iliad* as a starting point for his reflections on historiography through the category of ‘being with the dead’. Using Michel de Certeau’s *The Writing of History*, he shows that history is “a mode of writing constituted and operating precisely on the threshold of the living and the dead” (1988, p. 161). Historiography “restores, creates, and represents the dead along a chronological axis” (p. 162). But while de Certeau believes that historical writing inters death, Ruin emphasizes that it is “the center and starting point for a complex set of practices, rituals, and traditions that continue to *care* for and

to *be* with the dead” (p. 165). Historiographies, therefore, do not serve to suppress but to affirm death. Ruin makes this clear with the ‘Homeric question’. The debate as to whether the name Homer stands for a single historical person or at least for a concept that has been handed down over history shows that historiography does not push the dead aside, but actively deals with them and looks after their names. The anthropological-philosophical distinction between those cultures that live and communicate with their dead and those cultures that have left this practice behind must therefore be rethought. Historiographies reproduce and modify the cultures of death and communication with the dead. They are thus a form of being with the dead.

Chapter 7 looks at the interplay between cultural memory and Egyptian mortuary culture. The focus here is on the work of Jan Assmann (2005, 2011). Ruin makes it clear that the theory of cultural memory emerges from the attempt to understand how those technologies work that are supposed to ensure survival after death in this ancient context. Therefore, Ruin focuses on writing. Its emergence has transformed the practices of remembering and cultural memory. The life after and with the dead is based on “an essentially *semantic* condition” (p. 185), whereby burials and tombs can be seen “as the making of a *sign* for a present absence” (p. 185). Ruin states that memory is a symbolic space “that is accomplished by transitory human life by means of various cultural practices and techniques, and in particular by means of *writing*” (p. 191). He shows how Assmann’s theory of cultural memory adheres to a Hegelian-Durkheimian conception. Ruin criticizes, however, that this “results in a metaphysical reaffirmation of a temporality beyond time and of a supraindividual spirituality” (p. 196). Instead, he would like to think critically about the inner logic of “‘hauntological’ sociality” (p. 196). Assmann’s approach does not succeed in problematizing the “inner finitude of the being with the dead and its technical mediation” (p. 198). For Ruin, however, it is precisely the symbols through which mortality and finitude are to be transcended, because, ultimately, they “bear witness to the inner mortality of this aspiration” (p. 198). Even more: Not only the burial but death itself transforms the living into a sign that generates the temporality of a having-been and a having lived.

With his book, Ruin succeeds in making Heidegger’s term ‘being with the dead’ fruitful for interesting analyzes. It opens the thinking to the fact that the human sciences represent a constitutive contribution to the interaction between the living and the dead. Historiography, in particular, receives essential impulses from the ‘hauntological’ thinking of Ruin to be able to critically reflect on its scientific practice from an ethical and political point of view. Throughout the book, Ruin continues to emphasize the importance of not theoretically excluding the dead. Every human science, be it sociology, anthropology, archaeology or philology, is both embedded in the relationship between life and death and at the same time caretaker for those who have been. By stressing the category ‘being with the dead,’ Ruin shows how existential phenomenology can be used gainfully for the understanding of history and historical consciousness. In doing so, he not only makes a convincing contribution to Memory Studies, but his book also forms a successful link to Heidegger’s reflections on the dead.

By way of contrast, it is sobering how Ruin illuminates the relationship between the living and the dead. By only using a few empirical cases to illustrate his expanded

phenomenological ontology, he joins that tradition of academic books which are “attempting to speculate about the experiences of dying and death” (Kellehear 2007: 4). Ruin’s insights come from a detailed and astute reading of relevant texts on history and mortuary cultures. However, while he occasionally points out that the connections between the living and the dead affect their daily practices, there is a lack of relevant analyses to corroborate these statements. For this reason, especially those statements that relate to the actual practices within the necropolitical space, occasionally, seem to fall into the category of “intellectual musings” (Walter 2008: 321) on thanatological problems. Because of this problematic relationship to empiricism, it is not surprising that Ruin, even when dealing with care for the bones, omits the material aspects of being with the dead. This is aggravated by the fact that Ruin’s armchair theorizing is sometimes based on inadequate processing of the research literature. This becomes particularly clear when he repeatedly asserts that sociology has a problem with a community beyond death. Here, Ruin overlooks sociological developments that include the dead in sociality and date back more than a decade (e.g., Lindemann 2005). At the same time, he hides the entire—mainly British—Sociology of Death, Dying and Bereavement, which has long been concerned with how the living transform the domain of death, but also how the ‘continuing bonds’ with the dead affect the social (e.g., Howarth 2007; Thompson and Cox 2017; Walter 1999, 2017).

In conclusion, Ruin’s book is nevertheless a well-written reading that seems incredibly worthwhile for historians. His thoughts about what it means ‘to be with the dead’ open the view to the fact that death and the deceased are playing a role in every area of society. This is supported above all by the logical structure and the clearly structured argumentation in the book. Numerous connectivities for further research are offered to the reader, through which the ontological, ethical and political dimensions of what it means to be with the dead can be explored. And, above all, *Being with the Dead* is a successful contribution to give the dead more space in the human sciences.

**Funding** Open Access funding enabled and organized by Projekt DEAL.

**Open Access** This article is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License, which permits use, sharing, adaptation, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, as long as you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons licence, and indicate if changes were made. The images or other third party material in this article are included in the article’s Creative Commons licence, unless indicated otherwise in a credit line to the material. If material is not included in the article’s Creative Commons licence and your intended use is not permitted by statutory regulation or exceeds the permitted use, you will need to obtain permission directly from the copyright holder. To view a copy of this licence, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>.

## References

- Assmann, J. (2005 [2001]). *Death and salvation in Ancient Egypt*. (D. Lorton, Trans.). Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- Assmann, J. (2011 [2007]). *Cultural memory and early civilization: Writing, remembrance, and political imagination*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- De Certeau, M. (1988 [1975]). *The writing of history*. (T. Conley, Trans.). New York: Columbia University Press.
- Derrida, J. (1994 [1993]). *Specters of Marx. The state of the debt, the work of mourning and the new International*. (P. Kamuf, Trans.). New York & London: Routledge.
- Hegel, G. W. F. (1956). *The philosophy of history*. (J. Sibree, Trans.). Mineola, NY: Dover Publications.
- Heidegger, M. (1962 [1927]). *Being and time*. (J. Macquarrie & E. Robinson, Trans.). Oxford: Basil Blackwell.
- Hertz, R. (1960 [1907]). A contribution to the study of the collective representation of death. (R. Needham & C. Needham, Trans.). In R. Hertz, *Death & the right hand* (pp. 27–86). Glencoe, IL: The Free Press.
- Howarth, G. (2007). *Death and dying. A sociological introduction*. Cambridge & Malden, MA: Polity Press.
- Kellehear, A. (2007). *A Social history of dying*. Port Melbourne: Cambridge University Press.
- Levinas, E. (2000 [1993]). *God, death, and time*. (B. Bergo, Trans.) Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Lindemann, G. (2005). The analysis of the borders of the social world: A challenge for sociological theory. *Journal for the Theory of Social Behaviour*, 35(1), 69–98.
- Patočka, J. (1995). Phénoménologie de la vie après la mort. (E. Abrams, Trans.). In J. Patočka, *Papiers phénoménologiques* (pp. 145–156). Grenoble: Jérôme Millon.
- Thompson, N., & Cox, G. R. (Ed.). (2017). *Handbook of the sociology of death, grief, and bereavement. A guide to theory and practice*. New York & London: Routledge.
- Van Gennep, A. (1960 [1909]). *The rites of passage*. (M. V. Vizedom, Trans.). London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- Walter, T. (1999). *On bereavement. The culture of grief*. Buckingham: Open University Press.
- Walter, T. (2008). The sociology of death. *Sociology Compass*, 2(1), 317–336.
- Walter, T. (2017). *What death means now. Thinking critically about dying and grieving*. Bristol: Policy Press.

**Publisher's Note** Springer Nature remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.