# Book Review/ Compte rendu

**Ruth McManus,** *Death in a Global Age*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012, 268 pp., $30.00 Paperback (9780230224520)

The first striking thing about this book is the title itself. *Death in the Global Age* is a serious attempt to go beyond national borders and "highlight how contemporary changes in the social world (such as increased mobility, interconnectivity and global communication networks) are present in death as they are in life" (3). As such, this book is a credible answer to Ulrich Beck's call to reinvent sociology for the twenty first century by transcending "methodological nationalism," or the long standing sociological convention of analyzing societies as distinct national states, which is best exemplified by Talcott Parsons' conception of societies as "closed and self-equilibrating systems" (Beck 2005, 338). Focusing on the phenomenon of inequality, Beck proposes two steps for reinventing sociology: first de-constructing the traditional state-bound sociology of inequality and then re-constructing it for the global age. Of these two tasks of de-construction and re-construction, McManus focuses on the second.

What McManus aims to achieve is thus complex: on the one hand, she writes a book that appears to be targeting students and newcomers in the field, aiming to expose them to the main theoretical debates and substantive questions within the sociology of death and dying. At the same time, she attempts to reinvent the field itself by taking into account the interconnectedness of societies on the economic, political, and communicative fronts. The result is a book that far exceeds what is conventionally expected of a textbook and will be an informative resource for experts and newcomers alike.

McManus begins with a discussion of key theoretical perspectives in sociology — focusing on their ontological, epistemological, and axiological dimensions — and considers how they can inform current substantive discussions of death. Among the classic figures, Durkheim and Weber are highlighted, and among the key sociological perspectives structural-functionalism, interactionism, critical realism, and discursive approaches are examined. It is interesting to see how each of these perspectives sheds a different light on death. This chapter would have been

much more informative if the choice of theories/theorists was explicitly justified and if the discussion of each theoretical perspective in relation to death was carried out more systematically. The readers could have also benefited from a more explicit discussion of McManus' own theoretical reference points, which, after having read the whole book, appears to be Beck's and Giddens' theories of advanced modernity, globalization, and cosmopolitanism.

The second chapter outlines a new global death paradigm; that is, a new perspective for discussing death "linked to globally scaled networks" in the political, economic, cultural and kinship domains. Case studies of the global networks of blood and organ donations are used to illustrate the new social organization of death and dying. This chapter convincingly illustrates the interconnectedness of life and death globally and the fact that, rather than being denied, death is commodified and commercialized.

Other chapters apply the same global perspective to studying such salient topics in death and dying literature as life expectancy, the death industries, funerary rites, grief, mass death, religion, and the changing moral codes governing the representation and depiction of death. Of these I personally found the third chapter on demographic trends and life expectancies to be the most successful in terms of the application of a global outlook. But the book, overall, is not evenhanded in its discussion of the global currents influencing life and death. The result is that sometimes what is discussed as "global" only pertains to affluent nations and affluent individuals (e.g., death tourism created by Swiss euthanasia clinics). The reasons behind the imbalance are partly discussed and acknowledged in the Introduction: language barriers and academic asymmetries, which result in the overabundance of information about Western societies and a relative lack of information about others. In addition, McManus states that "British, Australian, US and European societies are sites of cultural innovation and do dominate many death issues and drive debates" (5). This statement is a self-fulfilling prophecy: it is true only to the extent that our focus on Western societies, the lack of knowledge about other societies, as well as language and cultural barriers give the impression that what is most talked about is also the most dominant. This might actually be the case, but there will not be any way of empirically validating this statement because of the lack of information to the contrary. In other words, the above statement is "non-falsifiable".

Although it might not have been humanly possible, within the confines discussed above, to provide a balanced account of the global currents shaping life and death, the discussion of non-Western cultures in the book could have been a bit more nuanced. With a few exceptions,

often when a society or culture outside of Western Europe, North America, Australia and New Zealand is discussed, it is primarily to highlight the effects of global inequalities, poverty, and religion. This gives the impression that such societies lack diverse cultural heritages and domestic economies governing their attitudes toward and practices concerning death. Instead, they appear as being overly determined by the dominant West and by religion.

A book on the global aspects of death and dying will be of interest to students and scholars around the world. Those in Canada will be surprised to see that, on page 48, Canada's public healthcare system is lumped together with the USA and described as a dual system (which is partly accurate but will come as a shock to Canadians who pride themselves in their public healthcare system and consider it a main distinction between Canada and the USA). Conversely, many American readers will be prompted to consult Wikipedia to confirm that Hurricane Katrina struck in August 2005 rather than in September 2005 as mentioned on page 144. Another minor glitch is that in the introduction, the author gives a courtesy warning that some of the images in the book might be disturbing, but flipping through the book, only three images were found, none of which qualified as such (and I am easily disturbed by graphic images). It is possible that there were originally some graphic images in Chapter 9 ("Representations of Mortality") which were later taken out.

These problems aside, *Death in the Global Age* is a convincing attempt at providing a resource on death for students and scholars alike which heeds Beck's call and aims to reinvent the field in light of global economic, political, cultural, and social linkages and interdependencies. I highly recommend this book to scholars in the area of death and dying and especially to instructors looking for an innovative and engaging book for their students.

*University of Alberta* Zohreh Bayatrizi

## REFERENCE

Beck, Ulrich "How Not to Become a Museum Piece." *The British Journal of Sociology* 56 (2005): 335-43.

**Zohreh Bayatrizi** is Assistant Professor in Sociology at the University of Alberta. She is the author of a number of publications on death including *Life Sentences: The Modern Ordering of Mortality* (2005).