# The *other* side of funerals and cemeteries. Reflections from the Plenary Session's chair (Part I)

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**Abstract.** This article takes a brief theoretical and reflective look at Rafaela Ferraz's plenary session at the What If'23 Conference. The theme of the speaker's session was the counterfactual history of the tradition of funerals and burials in Portugal, the main aim of which was to imagine an alternative scenario in which cremation had been institutionalised as a practice earlier in the country. We started from this motto and questioned cemeteries as cultural landscapes, taking up the counter-narrative discourse in relation to cremation, but we also expanded our approach by looking at funeral cards, analysing them - albeit briefly - as memorabilia.

Keywords: sociology, memorabilia, cultural landscapes, counterfactual history.

#### 1. Introduction

How can sociology contribute to a debate on the historicity and relevance of public cemeteries in Portugal? This was the first question that crossed our minds upon reading the theme of one of the plenary sessions - moderated by the author of this article, carried out by the lecturer Rafaela Ferraz. Although the lecturer has a background in criminology, it seemed evident to us that sociology could contribute with reflections on a broader spectrum, namely at the level of conceptualization, questioning and perception of cemeteries as vehicles of individual and collective memories, but also as cultural landscapes, denouncing emerging dynamics in contemporary societies, such as social inequalities, for instance.

After all, who can be cremated and who can be buried? This dichotomous issue appears with italics highlighted, as it indicates feelings of possession, places of power and the promotion of various types of status. It seems obvious to us that –discarding religious beliefs and practices - the choice between being cremated and being buried falls on a reflection based on economic criteria. In addition, there are also cultural and social issues. The choice of cremation, for example, causes the questions and possibilities of action to multiply in relation to the ashes of a family member, for example. There, in our opinion, the discourse starts to acquire an impersonal character, leading us to think: what do I do with this? This in a very trivial way, but it reflects a personal experience.

This theme aroused in us a sociological curiosity. Although I wanted to adopt a principle of impartiality and distance from the object under analysis, we had already gone through both situations, namely cremation and a so-called traditional funeral/burial. From a sociological point of view, individual and collective emotional and mnemonic experiences in relation to each of them are, in essence, distinct. However, if they are different, how do they approach each other? In the symbolic

construction of a grieving process and in the individual and collective strategies for celebrating life as an experiential stage.

It is not our intention to reproduce the contents presented by the lecturer in her communication, because the different academic backgrounds would make such a process difficult. On the contrary, we intend to contribute to her narrative by adding new perspectives. The key idea of Rafaela's aforementioned lecture concerned a questioning – based on a narrative of counterfactual history – in relation to the Portuguese social context, in the sense that Ferraz intended to identify some (possible) changes, if the practice of cremation had been implemented earlier in the national territory. From that moment on, topics such as urban planning, collective memory, social inequalities and political and community agency, among others, were addressed.

Now, our main objective, even if it is carried out in a logic of critical-reflective essay, is to provide a sociological perspective on this theme, having as a starting point the problematic of counterfactual history, and having as visual support some funerary brochures that the lecturer Rafaela Ferraz has been collecting since 2022<sup>1</sup>.

# 2. Cemeteries as a cultural landscape

Ferraz, in her presentation, offers us an initial – and insightful – framework on the practice of burials and on the creation of cemeteries in Portugal; a practice that dates back to the 1830s, when burials were still practiced in the grounds around churches. In fact, cemeteries, as we know them today, were only created from 1833 onwards – having become the norm in 1910 -, due to high mortality rates, the land around the churches was no longer sufficient to accommodate all fatalities. The lecturer [1], in another work, considers that the cemetery is a multifunctional space, which performs primary functions, but also secondary ones, that is, it can "be thought of as a green space, a space for the enhancement and promotion of cultural heritage" [1, p. 440 our translation].

Authors such as Francaviglia [2] state that most of the studies that have been carried out on cemeteries as a landscape, have an architectural emphasis, while others — although scarce — are dedicated to geographical issues, more specifically at the level of spatial planning; what they call necrogeography [2]. In fact, in view of this panorama, we can mention that rarer are the articles that have a sociological aspect. We do not want to say that this article is assumed to be a response to this gap, but it can be a starting point.

Haaland [3] presents some conceptions that seem interesting to us about the concept of landscape. On the one hand, it highlights that a natural landscape or a natural environment concern what exists, independently of individuals and social agents; On the other hand, the concept of landscape also refers to what the individual or social agent see when they look at their surroundings. However, what the individual sees may not be a mirror reflection of what actually exists. It is enough to take as an example the funeral as a ceremony and event, that is, as a practice. Rita Mendes [4] presents some considerations that can be used as an example. The author alludes to having gone to a funeral and that in it, she denoted an almost omnipresence of marketing elements to the funeral home that was organizing the ceremony. This is an example of a landscape. The author did not see the mirror reality, but only a fragment, because at the time she was interested in writing a book about the marketing created around funerals and by funeral homes. Certainly, other individuals present at the ceremony saw another landscape.

A cultural landscape [5] refers to something that is incorporated into a natural landscape, that is, it is a concept that can be used to describe actions and perceptions about a given landscape, which are loaded with meanings (emotional, subjective, etc.) that, in turn, take place in a specific socio-historical context. The funeral, burials and cremation acts are examples of such cultural landscapes; Just keep in mind the differences that exist between European and Asian countries, for example. At the same time,

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> They can be consulted on her website (https://rafaelaferraz.com/pagelas/).

cultural landscapes [5] can also refer to natural spatial elements that are culturally defined and resignified: the cemetery as a place of silence, of respect; the exterior of mortuary chapels as a place of 'conviviality'<sup>2</sup>.

Culture is created through mundane experiences lived in the material world [5]. Therefore, regardless of the functional organization of a given space, it will have a cultural meaning that is not necessarily reduced to its function. Returning to Mendes' previous idea [4], the mortuary chapel can be a space conducive to the development/application of a marketing strategy of the funeral home, but this is not its function. Again Francaviglia [2] states that cemeteries have functional elements, but also emotional elements that, in our view, contribute to the construction of a cultural meaning/materialization. From the point of view of their cultural significance, cemeteries, more than being a welcoming space for those who have died, are assumed as a place of conviviality and consolation for those who remain alive. In this sense, and recovering the counterfactual premises exposed by Ferraz at the conference, to what extent does cremation modify – or could have modified – this cultural landscape? The answer seems obvious to us. If we go back to the historicity of the practice of cremation, reiterating its institutionalization earlier, we can say that it would have forced the construction of 'new' spaces. The resulting mundane experiences would give rise to other cultural landscapes. For example, instead of cemeteries, we would have more gardens or 'memorial houses' where we would only see urns, photographs or perhaps personal objects. The physical landscape and urban planning of cities would change, and the existence of cemeteries as we know them would not be necessary. In this way, if we maintain this line of thought, we can assess that nothing would have changed in its genesis, only the manifestations and architectural representations would change.

We can go further and mention that cemeteries are a religious cultural landscape, because authors such as Sopher [7] advocate that these spaces are nothing more than an expression of a religious ideology in a territorial context. So, through this dynamic of thought, we can – by using counterfactual history – question the following: what if cemeteries or funerals did not have a religious implication? It's a difficult question to answer, mainly because of Portugal's deeply religious and Catholic past.

In an attempt to answer this question, we researched a little more about humanist funerals. According to Humanist Ceremonies UK³, a humanist funeral is a non-religious ceremony, carried out by a celebrant, that aims to celebrate acts in life as opposed to death. Engelck [8] argues that the concept 'non-religious' is used to describe the individual's desire not to have a ceremony performed by a priest or a clerical figure. On the other hand, the author [8] highlights the preponderant role of the body being present in the funeral ceremony⁴. The author elucidates us, arguing that "The anthropology of death has, in essence, always been an anthropology of the body [...] of the body's putrescence and decomposition, get unfolded into social projects of triumph [...]". In fact, the humanist funeral emerges, in the UK, associated with a practice that is chosen by agnostics, atheists, materialists, secularists, etc.; but what if this had been the practice installed in Portugal? What would have changed? We leave this question open.

# 2.1. All or Nothing in the Afterlife

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> It should be noted that this concept of conviviality is related to Goffman's contributions on the idea of theatrical metaphor [6]. The theatrical metaphor can be associated with a process of description of the staging of the multiple actions of daily life, by social agents. For example, crying or wearing dark clothes to fit into a funeral environment, even if you don't want to do it.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>3</sup> Available at: <a href="https://humanists.uk/ceremonies/funerals/blog/what-is-a-humanist-funeral/">https://humanists.uk/ceremonies/funerals/blog/what-is-a-humanist-funeral/</a>

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>4</sup> It is accompanied by one or more *curriculum vitae* that can be read during the ceremony, as a compliment of the experience of that individual

Now we have entered another point, that of the cultural landscape in relation to the concept of cultural memory. Watkins [9] observes the cemetery as a cultural landscape, i.e., the author sees cemeteries as having been producing – or having the capacity to produce – social changes in communities. "The landscape of the cemetery as a whole is a residue, which we can use as evidence of social trends, cultural patterns, and prevailing ideologies" [9, p. 52]. In the presentation, Rafaela tells us about this theme, namely the monumentalization of cemeteries and their decoration, as aspects that would have disappeared if cremation had been instituted as a widespread practice. However, here we questioned whether this monumentalization would not pass into the interior of the domestic space (ornate furniture decorated with urns), or even into contemporary gardens of rest of ashes and urns.

When the debate opened at the conference, after seeing similar images in Rafaela's presentation, and after listening to her presentation, I questioned her on the topic of social inequalities. In fact, chapels and family tombs, such as the one shown in Figure 1, denote a social position, a *status*. What Bourdieu [10] calls symbolic capital, that is, forms of capital that are recognized in terms of social value. So, to a certain extent, cremation would dilute these inequalities. Moreover, the existence or non-existence of monumentalized tombs in cemeteries would also contribute to a change in the cultural landscape of this space; not least because they would no longer be associated with manifestations of a material culture. The tombstone, color, design and setting, and writings are defined by the familiar. As in other industry sectors, there are trends in this industry. The obelisk tends to be ordinary and adorned with a cross, while the funeral 'drawers' on the one hand demonstrate a greater rationalization of space.

On the other hand, Ferraz also mentioned changes in the use of coffins, in the use of territories, in the maintenance of spaces and even changes from an environmental point of view. For example, cremation would consume more energy. The question of the physical object that surrounds the body at the time of the funeral [8] seems to us to be an excellent point of questioning. In the case of funerals, the dichotomy of having the coffin open or closed during the ceremony emerges, and how this act represents the cultural landscape in that moment. In the case of cremation, we can question the meanings of keeping the urn or scattering the ashes in other physical locations, and how this also influences the cultural landscape of a given socio-historical context.

In contemporary societies, there is an enormous regulation of death [11] and, as such, it becomes urgent to discuss the main differences between private and public memorialization practices, in relation to the counterfactual history that Rafaela Ferraz brought us with her presentation. In both practices, it seems that we are dealing with the greater or lesser visibility of death, and this visibility can manifest itself in several axes: 1) economic; 2) cultural; 3) symbolic; 4) affective. More than impacts - loss of revenue for public entities and the potential shocks in the coffin production industry (if cremation had proliferated) - we recognize that the main change would be in terms of death awareness. In contemporary societies, there is a trend towards the personalized and individualized experience of death, both in physical spaces, in the private and public sphere, but also in virtual spaces. An example can be the placement of personal objects in tombs. So, it seems to us that if cremation had been the reigning practice, societies would have different mechanisms for regulating death. These personalizations would cease to exist, and perhaps the manifestations in virtual spaces would be more pronounced, for example, the creation of family groups for sharing stories, broadcasts, etc. It may seem exaggerated, but the audiovisual record of the process would effectively be the only trace of the death of a certain individual, as the 'body' disappeared, as well as its archival record [tomb] communitarian. However, we can also think of counterfactual history from another perspective, for example roadside memorials.

Surely all of us, at some point or in some place, have seen roadside memorials especially related to road accidents. Now, if individuals, as social agents, create cultural narratives about physical landscapes, with the practice of cremation, we can assess that the reality of roadside memorials could

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>5</sup> Example of monumentalization in the Agramonte cemetery in Porto: https://www.facebook.com/pages/Cemit%C3%A9rio-de-Agramonte/474553429323101

be accentuated. Let's see that the symbology of a certain place for some will certainly not be the same for all. If a roadside memorial can be created from a memory of loss and sadness, with cremation, the act of scattering body ashes or placing an urn in a certain physical territory, it can symbolize a connection to memories and happy experiences. At the same time, it is also necessary to question the differences between countries in relation to these contexts and practices. While in Portugal roadside memorials are always demarcated by the same typology, namely a cross, floral arrangement and cyrios, in countries such as Chile, *animitas* are created, that is, large landmarks<sup>6</sup>.

In fact, what we intend to assess with this section is that, in our perspective, nothing would have changed. Better, there would have been changes, yes, but not so significant that we could totally rethink the way we face death and funeral practices. If, on the one hand, we mention that the funeral industry is massified today, if there had been a proliferation of acceptance and routinization of cremation, the companies/places that do it would also have become massive. The process of massification is intrinsically tied to the dynamics of capitalism, in which every element incorporated into the capitalist structure is driven by the imperative of profit generation. While it is conceivable that, over time, cremation services might adopt marketing strategies—perhaps through tailored service packages or by integrating an environmentally conscious discourse—the capitalist model of massification does not imply absolute uniformity. Instead, as Bourdieu [12] argues, capitalism often perpetuates social segmentation, since maintaining distinctiveness within consumption practices is a powerful strategy for market consolidation. This allows capitalist systems to standardize offerings while simultaneously creating products or services that cater to various social distinctions. Moreover, Catroga [13] emphasizes that the cultural framing of death and its rituals reflects broader societal changes, suggesting that even within a commodified context, the practices surrounding cremation can both signify and reinforce cultural values. Thus, any potential shift toward the widespread adoption of cremation would not only require institutional regulation but also entail a secular reconfiguration of spaces associated with death and the establishment of normative practices around cremation and mourning. In this context, massification would coexist with differentiation, illustrating capitalism's dual tendencies to both universalize and segment consumer experiences Thus, any potential shift toward the widespread adoption of cremation would not only require institutional regulation but also entail a secular reconfiguration of spaces associated with death and the establishment of normative practices around cremation and mourning. In this context, massification would coexist with differentiation, illustrating capitalism's dual tendencies to both universalize and segment consumer experiences.

## 3. Printed faith and religious collectibles

The commercialization of funeral materials, such as memorial brochures and floral arrangements, reflects the complex intersection between consumerism and the symbolic aspects embedded in modern funeral practices. While these objects are presented as symbols of respect and memory, their mass production and widespread availability suggest an underlying commodification, turning private symbols of grief into consumer items. Again, as Bourdieu [12] discusses, capitalist systems have a tendency to elevate the symbolic capital of certain social practices, adding value to objects associated with socially significant rituals. This phenomenon is particularly evident in the funeral industry, where emotional significance is leveraged to create marketable products that ostensibly honor the deceased but simultaneously uphold social distinctions through differentiated products and services. Thus, even elements such as floral arrangements, customized coffins, and

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>6</sup> Example of an *animita* in Chile: <a href="https://www.publico.pt/2023/07/25/p3/fotogaleria/chile-animitas-longo-estrada-homenagens-para-todos-verem-410569">https://www.publico.pt/2023/07/25/p3/fotogaleria/chile-animitas-longo-estrada-homenagens-para-todos-verem-410569</a>; Example of a roadside memorial in Portugal: <a href="https://www.sulinformacao.pt/2012/01/memorial-assinala-local-da-morte-dos-dois-jovens-em-acidente-de-motos/">https://www.sulinformacao.pt/2012/01/memorial-assinala-local-da-morte-dos-dois-jovens-em-acidente-de-motos/</a>

memorial cards cater to a consumerist demand that reflects both personal sentiment and societal norms, transforming the funeral into both an expression of grief and a reflection of consumer culture. Now, as an adult and with academic training, I see that the symbology is not in the object itself, but rather in the individual. At funerals of people with whom one does not have a close relationship, he could only see the massification and consumerism of the funeral industry, evident in the decoration of the chapel, in the clothes, in the coffin, in the adornments and in the number of palms and floral arrangements that were placed in the tombs. At funerals of close relatives, I thought about my discomfort and sense of loss, but above all about that person's non-existence in mundane life and its implications. Funeral marketing is only fruitful because it depends on emotions.

Funeral cards are, in essence, items of memorabilia. They can even be collectibles. But why? Perhaps because they represent a record, and memory lives on records. Could it be that with the proliferation of cremation practices, funeral brochures would also be produced? If so, would they be in the same moulds? Why are some funeral cards collectible and others – such as the ads published on the social networks of funeral homes – are not? Is there beauty, attractiveness and elements of rarity in the cards, which make them collector's objects and memorabilia?

On the website, the lecturer and author Rafaela Ferraz presents us with her collection of funeral cards. This was not an advanced topic discussed at the conference, but after researching her work, I found it to be a curious aspect and worthy of discussion. On its website, the information cards are catalogued, as if it were a traditional archive, with reference to the biographical data of the deceased and there is also a reference to elements of a religious nature. Not being an expert on the subject, the main purpose of this section is to instigate curiosity, debate and research on this topic, which still deserves further scientific exploration.



Figure 1: Funeral card Cudell, 1962. Source: Rafaela Ferraz Ferreira. <a href="https://rafaelaferraz.com/pagelas/">https://rafaelaferraz.com/pagelas/</a>



1972. Source: Raf Encarnação, Funeral 2: card Figure https://rafaelaferraz.com/pagelas/



3: Figure Funeral 1974. Ferreira. card Chicória, Source: Rafaela Ferraz https://rafaelaferraz.com/pagelas/

In three cards we found the same cover image, Michelangelo's *Pietà* [Piety], which represents Jesus dead in his mother's arms (see Figures 1, 2 and 3). The cultural landscape of each of these ceremonies was certainly different, although the brochure has the same configuration. We also believed that the uniqueness of each brochure was not questioned, which is curious from the point of view of emotional attachment to objects. Two of these cards are from the 1970s and the other from the 1960s. Two Portuguese and one German; two of men and one of a woman. The prayer on the inside of each of the cards is different, but the outside is very similar. In the author's archive, we also found a brochure referring to a priest and a brochure referring to a Nun, in both we see more elaborate colours and designs, contrasting with the cards of those who did not have a position within the religious hierarchy (Figures 4 and 5). Returning to the theme of social inequalities, can we consider these elements as products of such a reality? Do these differences remain today? We must not forget that these images are from the 1970s.



Figure 4: Funeral card Priest lousado, 1970. Source: Rafaela Ferraz Ferreira. <a href="https://rafaelaferraz.com/pagelas/">https://rafaelaferraz.com/pagelas/</a>



Figure 5: Funeral card Nun Izaguirre, 1975.

Funeral cards serve as tangible connectors between the living and the deceased, relying on visual elements—such as specific colors, religious imagery, and prayers—that are deeply rooted in traditional funeral practices. These elements are imbued with symbolic meaning, which is often most potent within the immediate context of a funeral or wake. [14, 15]. However, outside of this ritualized setting, these objects do not lose their significance entirely; rather, they can take on new meanings. For collectors, for example, these cards might represent historical or cultural artifacts, while for academics, they serve as catalogable items that reveal insights into societal practices around death and mourning. This interpretive flexibility highlights the sociological importance of studying such objects, as they demonstrate how consumer items linked to intimate and emotional rituals can be recontextualized. Furthermore, in scenarios where cremation becomes prevalent, it is conceivable that the form and aesthetic of these cards might adapt—perhaps becoming more minimalist or secular reflecting shifts in ritualistic practices. The "aura" of these cards, as products, thus lies not only in their original commemorative purpose but also in their ability to embody personal memories and retain a unique sense of individualization, even when repurposed or viewed in different contexts. This connection to memory and individuality endows funeral cards with a dual role as both personal memorabilia and sociocultural artifacts, capable of transcending their immediate funeral context to serve as mementos or even objects of study. The aura [16] of these cards is also associated with a feeling/notion of individualization, because they are a physical object, placed in a moment of celebration and farewell, loaded with emotions and meanings, a feeling of exaltation of the individual is presupposed, but also of exaltation of the memory of a third party about him. In addition, the idea of being a product/object that is given or acquired during the funeral ceremony and wake is also present. There are feelings of possession or detachment from it, and this makes it considered as memorabilia to a greater or lesser extent.

The exchange of funeral cards – during funeral cerimonies - among friends, neighbors, colleagues, or acquaintances underscores the role these objects play in reinforcing community bonds. Retaining a funeral card from a friend's relative, for instance, can symbolize respect and shared mourning, fostering a sense of solidarity that strengthens relationships not only with the friend but potentially with their broader family network. These cards, therefore, function as tools for communal remembrance, extending beyond individual grief to embody a shared cultural acknowledgment of loss. This communal dimension of funeral cards is particularly relevant in understanding how traditional funerals contribute to social cohesion. In contexts where alternative practices, such as purely secular or non-traditional memorials, become more common, the symbolic role of these cards—and the networks they help build—may shift or diminish, reflecting broader cultural transformations in society's approach to death and remembrance.

#### 4. Final remarks

More than establishing conclusions, our main intention was to foster discussion on this topic which, despite being a common point in the lives of all social agents, is often considered to be non-questionable.

The sociological examination of death and its rituals is essential for understanding broader social dynamics, as Émile Durkheim [17] demonstrated in his foundational work on suicide. Durkheim [17] argued that voluntary death is shaped not by isolated individual motives but by social structures that exert profound influences on personal actions, showing how societal organization can predispose individuals toward specific outcomes. Analyzing death through this sociological lens—as a socially conditioned process—allows us to recognize its relevance and transformative nature in social life. While this article does not emerge from an exhaustive empirical investigation, it raises fundamental reflections inspired by sociological discourse, which invites us to consider the evolving role of sociology in addressing themes like death. Although sometimes perceived as macabre, the sociology of death opens a necessary avenue for understanding social processes, highlighting how such themes remain both timely and significant for comprehending the ways society shapes, and is shaped by, practices surrounding death and mourning.

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