

# Pollution and Purity

SJAAK VAN DER GEEST

University of Amsterdam, The Netherlands

“Pollution” and “purity” form a classic conceptual pair in cultural anthropology, mostly applied to ritual status. The solemn and somewhat archaic tone of the two terms betrays their religious pedigree, but pollution and purity are basically about very mundane matters: being dirty and being clean. These everyday experiences lend themselves eminently as metaphors to express positive or negative valuation of nearly everything in human lives. Their efficacy as metaphors lies in the intense visceral emotions of aversion and attraction concerning what is physically dirty or clean. “Dirt” and “cleanliness” may therefore be better terms for an anthropological discourse on everyday experience and the emotions of disgust and desire.

## CULTURE DOMAINS

Nearly everywhere in the anthropological literature it is argued that “dirty” and “clean” are used to draw boundaries and make pertinent distinctions between what is good and bad in some sense or other. That drawing of judgmental boundaries can be done in almost any field of human experience: social, religious, and moral; and with regard to sex and intimacy, gender, health, and “civilization.”

In his early work on Andaman society, Radcliffe-Brown (1952) demonstrated how taboos and rules to avoid pollution helped to produce and maintain social order between

different categories of people: men and women; older and younger persons; parents and children; leaders and subjects. Today, systems of political and social inequality are still being bolstered by popular ideas that specific “others” are dirty, smell dirty, have dirty habits, and eat dirty food. Racism and the Indian caste system are obvious examples of dirt-related justifications of social exclusion. Similar mechanisms are employed in mutual perceptions of ethnic groups and in relations between migrants and autochthones everywhere in the world. People who are different because of sexual practice, bodily appearance, disability, occupation, or criminal offense suffer the same tarnishing. In all these cases “dirty” is a convenient derogatory and sometimes even stigmatizing synonym for “other.” Excluding others in this manner implicitly confirms and reinforces the homogeneity and superiority (purity) of one’s own group, as Radcliffe-Brown suggested many years ago.

Where religion constitutes the ultimate legitimization of societal norms and hierarchy, purity and pollution provide a connection between social and religious order and disorder. But also within religion, pure versus polluted prove effective didactics of religious approval versus disapproval, of sanctity versus sinfulness. Sin brings about a state of pollution that needs to be cleansed by prayer, confession, or ritual purification. From religious impurity it is a small step to morality. “Dirty,” again, is one of the most common qualifications to express moral condemnation. Disapproving language gathers strength and imagination when dirt-related terms are included. “Shit” and equivalent terms have become popular expletives for negative

*The Wiley Blackwell Encyclopedia of Health, Illness, Behavior, and Society*, First Edition.

Edited by William C. Cockerham, Robert Dingwall, and Stella R. Quah.

© 2014 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd. Published 2014 by John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.

assertions (but – by an interesting twist of language – also for positive avowals).

Gender distinction and gender hostility are cast in terms of dirt and pollution worldwide. Menstruation, pregnancy, and delivery in particular are often seen by men as polluting and therefore dangerous states, which force women into subordination and withdrawal from social life (cf. Meigs 1984). Sex and intimacy are particularly prone to metaphors of cleanliness and dirt. When sex transgresses boundaries of personal integrity and violates rules of intimacy, dirt and contamination are the first associations that cause intense feelings of disgust and call for cleaning in symbolic as well as in the literal sense of the term.

In health and health care, dirt and cleanliness have established themselves more firmly than in any other domain of life. Hygiene has become the basic principle of healthy living. Here cleanliness has assumed a medical status and dropped its metaphorical identity. Infection, contagion, the touch of dirt – hygiene's antipode – is the origin of many diseases. Unclean water and lack of good sanitation are known to be major killers of people in poor societies (Curtis 1998). It should be noted, however, that improved hygiene is not necessarily a motive for building better sanitary facilities. A case study of rural Benin shows that toilets are primarily seen as status symbols (Jenkins and Curtis 2005) and in Cameroon inhabitants of two communities resist the building of latrines because they interfere with their perception of cleanliness and a good life (Ndonko 1993). Yet, one can say that medical hygiene is becoming an increasingly important element in cultures that are caught in the process of medicalization. At the same time, hygienic behavior retains a strong social purpose: it demonstrates civilized manners. People are known to behave much

less hygienically when they are not observed by others (Cahil et al. 1985).

## THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES

Dirt and cleanliness have been the subject of theorizing in several anthropological and sociological perspectives since the beginning of social sciences. Early evolutionist thinkers in the tradition of Darwin looked upon the fear and avoidance of dirt as defense mechanisms against sickness and other danger. They believed there was a hidden rationality in the seemingly spontaneous disgust of dirty things and animals. Religious rules about purity and pollution and taboos on eating certain food or touching unclean objects or persons were medical prescriptions in disguise. Mosaic laws in the biblical texts of Deuteronomy and Leviticus, for example, were perceived as rules for healthy living, even though some of these rules do not make any medical sense today. Curtis and Biran (2001), who carried out research in five different locations, present five elicitors of disgust: body excretions and body parts, certain animals, spoiled food, certain categories of "other people," and breaches of morality. Disgust, they write, "is one of the mechanisms crafted by natural selection to keep our distance from contagion" (2001, 22). Feces, for example, are mentioned as transmitters of more than 20 diseases. Other people's breath, lice and rats, and sexual organs, all of which score high for human disgust, are also common sources of infection.

Marvin Harris (1985) added ecological wisdom to the evolutionary perspective on food taboos and food recommendations. The prohibition of pork, for example, prevented the raising of pigs if that would be detrimental for the environment. In the same vein, he hypothesized that cannibalism – an abomination in most cultures – became an accepted form of consumption among

the Aztecs who faced a depletion of their natural fauna.

It was against these evolutionist and materialist interpretations of dirt avoidance that Mary Douglas (1970) took a stand. "In chasing dirt," she wrote, "we are not governed by anxiety to escape disease, but are positively re-ordering our environment, making it conform to an idea" (1970, 12). With her famous dictum "Dirt is matter out of place" she rejected the concept of dirt as a fixed quality of particular objects, substances, animals, or human beings and turned dirt into a radically contextual phenomenon. Absolute dirt, therefore, does not exist; it is the context that determines what/who is clean and what/who is dirty. Saliva in my mouth or caught in a handkerchief is hygienic, but when it falls on the table it is extremely dirty. Conversely, something that is generally regarded as pure, a glass of wine, becomes dirt when it is spilled on a dress.

Douglas's thesis is that the concepts of dirt and cleanliness are strong tools to establish order. They point out what is the appropriate place for anything in life. That definition makes clear why "dirty" and "clean" are such convenient tools for drawing boundaries in any cultural domain. The presence of dirt as a condition of disorder carries with it a strong appeal to restore order in social, religious, moral, sexual, etc. matters. The metaphor of dirt helps to formulate the norms and values of culture. Hygiene, in other words, is a basic cultural act, not just a medical practice.

The psychologist Paul Rozin and colleagues published extensively on disgust as a meaningful human emotion and a reaction to destructions of life. What is most revolting, according to Rozin, is a rotting corpse. Rozin regards abhorrence of dirt ultimately as fear of death (Rozin, Haidt, and McCauley 2000).

The German sociologist Norbert Elias (1982), who developed the perspective of

"civilization process," gave dirt a central place as a problem that cultures continuously redefine in a process of refinement and internalization of civilized manners. One of the characteristics of this refinement is a moving away from animalistic features of humans. Bodily functions and substances are increasingly seen as dirty and are covered and dissimulated. Revealing them is regarded as uncivilized. Activities such as sleeping, sex, and defecation should only take place in the private sphere. Better sanitary facilities are seen as signs of progress in civilization (cf. Goudsblom 1986).

Inspired by Douglas's vision of purity and pollution, Van der Geest (2007) has added a relational dimension to the concept of "matter out of place." The strongest feelings of disgust arise in the unwelcome close presence of others. Shoes on a table may be dirty, as Douglas writes, but their presence on the table becomes really uncomfortable if they belong to another person and are placed right in front of us. Thus they become a disgusting invasion of our personal territory; they penetrate our "social skin." The experience of sexual harassment, the unwanted breach of personal and bodily integrity, causes the same revulsion but more intensely.

In conclusion, what is most deeply felt to be out of place is what invades our most private domain. Apparently, the dominant guarantor of social order, at least in Western society, is the boundary between people as individuals. Transgressing those boundaries results in undesired intimacy, which is ultimate dirt. It is no surprise that sexual harassment is viewed as a most disgusting experience and sexual abuse as a hideous crime.

SEE ALSO: Disability; Race and Gender: Intersectionality Theory; Sex; Stigma

## REFERENCES

- Cahil, S. E., with Distler, W., Lachowetz, C., Meaney, A., Tarallo, R., and Willard, T. 1985. "Meanwhile Backstage: Public Bathrooms and the Interaction Order." *Urban Life* 14(1): 33–58.
- Curtis, V. 1998. "The Dangers of Dirt: Household, Hygiene and Health." Dissertation, Agricultural University Wageningen, The Netherlands.
- Curtis, V., and Biran, A. 2001. "Dirt, Disgust and Disease: Is Hygiene in Our Genes?" *Perspectives in Biology & Medicine* 44(1): 17–31.
- Douglas, M. 1970 [1966]. *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo*. Harmondsworth, UK: Penguin.
- Elias, N. 1982 [1939]. *The Civilizing Process*. New York: Pantheon.
- Goudsblom, J. 1986. "Public Health and the Civilizing Process." *Milbank Quarterly* 64(2): 161–188.
- Harris, M. 1985. *Good to Eat: Riddles of Food and Culture*. New York: Harper & Row.
- Jenkins, M. W., and Curtis, V. 2005. "Achieving the 'Good Life': Why Some People Want Latrines in Rural Benin." *Social Science & Medicine* 61: 2446–2459.
- Meigs, A. S. 1984. *Food, Sex and Pollution*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.
- Ndonko, F. T. 1993. *Représentations culturelles des excréments*. Münster: Lit.
- Radcliffe-Brown, A. R. 1952. *Structure and Function in Primitive Society*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- Rozin, P., Haidt, J., and McCauley, C. R. 2000. "Disgust." In *Handbook of Emotions*, edited by M. Lewis, J. M. Haviland-Jones, and L. Feldman Barrett, 637–653. New York: Guilford.
- Van der Geest, S. 2007. "The Social Life of Faeces: System in the Dirt." In *Wildness and Sensation: An Anthropology of Sinister and Sensuous Realms*, edited by R. van Ginkel and A. Strating, 381–397. Amsterdam: Spinhuis.

## FURTHER READING

- Aretxaga, B. 1995. "Dirty Protest: Symbolic Overdetermination and Gender in Northern Ireland Ethnic Violence." *Ethos* 23(2): 123–148.
- Kochar, V. 1978. "Culture and Hygiene in Rural West Bengal." In *Sanitation in Developing Countries*, edited by A. Pacey, 176–185. Chichester, UK Somerset, NJ: Wiley.
- Kolnai, A. 2004 [1927]. *On Disgust*. Chicago, IL: Open Court.
- Lea, R. "The Shitful Body: Excretion and Control." *Medische Antropologie* 11(1): 7–18.
- Menninghaus, W. 2003. *Disgust: The Theory and History of a Strong Sensation*. New York: State University of New York Press.
- Miller, I. 1997. *The Anatomy of Disgust*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Quam, M. D. 1990. "The Sick Role, Stigma and Pollution: The Case of AIDS." In *Culture and AIDS*, edited by D. A. Feldman, 29–44. New York: Praeger.
- Rozin, P., and Fallon, A. E. 1987. "A Perspective on Disgust." *Psychological Review* 94(1): 23–41.
- Van der Geest, S. 1998. "Akan Shit: Getting Rid of Dirt in Ghana." *Anthropology Today* 14(3): 8–12.
- Wilson, R. R. 2002. *The Hydra's Tale: Imagining Disgust*. Edmonton: University of Alberta Press.