

## Smear Campaigns

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A talk given at the Unclean Beings symposium, Wellcome Collection, London, 16 July 2011.

It is customary, almost, on occasions such as this, one might say, compulsory, to say that dirt is matter out of place, or, sometimes, ‘merely’ matter out of place. As the advertising posters for this exhibition also reassure us, we are indebted for this insight to the sociologist, Mary Douglas. In fact, however, though she provides some neat and striking demonstrations of the principle that dirt is matter out of place, she did not originate it at all, nor in fact, meticulous scholar that she was, does she claim to have originated it. Indeed, in *Purity and Danger*, her 1966 study of ideas of pollution, she refers explicitly to ‘*the old idea* of dirt as matter out of place’ (my emphasis). For it is indeed an old idea, or one, at least, that is older than her book. Edwin Bevan begins his 1911 article on the philosophy of dirt with the question ‘What is dirt’, and describes ‘Matter in the wrong place’ as the ‘popular answer’ to the question, suggesting that the phrase has been ‘fathered sometimes on the poet Southey, sometimes on Palmerston’. Southey seems not to have used this precise phrase, and the reference may be to his poem in praise of the pig:

The Pig is a philosopher, who knows  
No prejudice. Dirt? – Jacob, what is dirt?  
If matter, – why, the delicate dish that tempts  
An o’ergorged Epicure to the last morsel  
That stuffs him to the throat-gates, is no more.  
If matter be not, but, as Sages say,  
Spirit is all, and all things visible  
Are one, the infinitely modified.  
Think, Jacob, what that Pig is, and the mire  
In which he stands ankle-deep (Southey 1839, 174)

Palmerston’s formulation is also slightly different, and nor does he claim its authorship. During an address to the Royal Agricultural Society in 1852, he said ‘I have heard a definition of dirt. I have heard it said that dirt is nothing but a thing in a wrong place. Now, the dirt of our towns precisely corresponds with that definition’ (Anon 1852, 8). The definition of dirt as matter out of place is, itself, a commonplace, which means that it is hard to pin down or put in its proper place.

Bevan goes on to observe that, though displacement may be necessary to definitions of dirt, it is not sufficient for them. Though dirt may be matter out of place, matter out of place (my books rearranged by the cleaner, my phone in the pocket of a thief, the knives in the fork drawer, me on the wrong bus) is not necessarily dirty (Bevan 1911, 189). Indeed, some of the examples that Mary Douglas herself gives of matter out of place are hard to see as dirty: ‘Shoes are not dirty in themselves, but it is dirty to place them on the dining table; food is not dirty in itself but it is dirty to leave cooking utensils in the bedroom, or food bespattered on clothing; similarly bathroom equipment in the drawing room; clothing lying on chairs; out-door things in-doors; upstairs things downstairs; under-clothing appearing where over-clothing should be’ (Douglas 2003, 36-7). Outdoor things indoors (spades, bicycles) may sometimes be dirty, but not are by no means always so (umbrellas and mackintoshes). Indoor things outdoors are usually not dirty at all, though the example of washing lines may seem decisive enough (why, I have often wondered, would somebody hang out their dirty washing for all to see?). And, as regards ‘bathroom equipment in the drawing room’, I cannot make out what is dirty exactly about a shower cap on a sofa. Indeed, Douglas herself observes that not all spatial anomalies strike us as pollutions, since they sometimes provoke laughter rather than revulsion (Douglas 2003, 38). After all, metaphor may be described as something out of place – the attributes of one thing being displaced to apply to another – but, though there have been linguistic purists who have found impropriety in metaphor, few of us would regard the complication of ideas introduced by metaphor as *dirty*.

So not all matter out of place is dirty. So what kind of matter out of place is dirty? What makes for the dirtiness of displaced matter? In fact, the title of Mary Douglas’s 1966 text gives us a clue. Dirt is matter *dangerously* out of place, a disruption of a symbolic pattern that seems disturbing or threatening. Her definition of pollution behaviour is ‘the reaction which condemns any object or idea likely to confuse or contradict cherished classifications’ (Douglas 2003, 37), the important word here being ‘cherished’. The disruption of the classificatory system, the matter out of place, has to *matter*, for it to be dirty. Yet this may still seem a little arbitrary, abstract and ultimately circular. If we ask, what specific kinds of things seem dangerously out of place, rather than amusingly or nonsensically so, we find ourselves unable to say much more than the kinds of things that seem to be dangerous, the things that happen to disrupt things we happen to cherish.

Much dirt-thinking is phobic, but I want to suggest that it is ultimately agoraphobic. This emerges clearly enough when we consider some of the origins and associations of words denoting non-dirtiness. A clue is given by the fact that the word clean is cognate with *klein*, small, which also signified clear, pure, neat, fine, tiny, thin and snug. Cleanness signifies mineness, and the mineness in particular of the most intimate form of matter, that to which I am closest, because that in which I am most tightly enclosed, my own body. The tender, slender 'I' is essentially topological. The smallness of cleanness comes from its fragility, the fact that it is so easily violable. The opposite of the clean is in this sense what is known in English as the *gross* – with the sense of the nauseous that comes from that which exceeds its bounds or proper place – the word *proper* being close to French *propre*, clean, correct, appropriate. The contrast between the exorbitant and the reduced is nicely encapsulated in the contrast between what are called gross and net values, my net salary being what I have left when everything that is due to others has been taken away (*net* being the French word for clean). The unclean is therefore not just what is in the wrong place, but what, being in that place, threatens to invade or overtake it. And, for the intensely competitive kinds of creatures that human beings are, that threat means, for the most part, not the natural world, or other species, but other members of one's own species; not other beings, but others who might come to occupy my own place.

But there is another feature of the clean to which the success of the 'matter out of place' definition can make us insufficiently attentive, a feature that is indicated by the word tidy, which means, not in place, but in due time, seasonable. In Middle English, tidy could also mean brave, skilful, able or virtuous, a usage that survives in an expression like 'a tidy sum of money'.

If the clean is essentially that which is restricted to a small and governable space, the enclosure and self-identity of the cell, that involution of form which defines and characterises all living organisms on our planet, then what the fine and private place of the cell defends against is time, conceived as decay, degradation, mortality and mixture. Cleanness, let us say, is space itself, the space of suspended time, the space cleared for and by the remission of the flux of time. If cleanness is space itself, dirt is time, since time is what invades and degrades every well-appointed space. Time is mixture, promiscuity itself, because no moment is completely distinguishable from any other moment. Time is unclean. Cleanness is indicative, dirt is subjunctive.

The most distinctive feature of the pollution against which purity codes defend is that dirt is highly mobile. There is no more terrifying enactment of this than Dr Seuss's *The Cat in the Hat Comes Back*, which concerns the chain of consequences of a stain left around the bath after the louche Cat in the Hat has eaten a pink cake in it. The cat cleans the pink bath-ring with mother's white dress; 'Now the tub was all clean/But her dress was a mess.' The stain is wiped off the dress on to the white wall, wiped off the wall with two shoes, wiped off the shoes on to a rug – ' "But now we have rug spots," I yelled/"What a day! Rug spots? What next?/Can you take *that* away?" ' – wiped off on to the bed. The cat removes his hat to reveal a sequence of smaller cats with smaller cats in their hats, who only succeed in blowing the stain out of the house into the snow, where it has now expanded to a kind of industrial-scale pollution. Only the magical principle of VOOM contained under the hat of the last cat, little cat Z, succeeds in dispersing the stain. As Lady Macbeth discovers, cleaning itself multiplies uncleanness.

This is why dirt is the threat of the dissolution of clarity. It also explains a central paradox of the clean, namely that it is supposed to be a primary or pristine condition, that which comes before corruption or contamination, but is, in fact, the result of an action performed in time. The condition of cleanness is a past participle. The clean is the cleaned: politeness and the police are those who have been polished, and the *polis* itself may be the pure (Sanskrit *pu-*, pure and *pur*, a place). The relativity of position which has been held to characterise the dirty is conceivable as a relativity of time. The dream of a chaste or immaculate body is the dream of a body from which the movements of time have been purged, as in the idea of a Virgin birth. This is surely why ideas of the unclean are focussed not just on the body, but on those aspects of the body that most remind us of our existence in time – eating, defecation, menstruation, parturition and death. Pollution and purification are also themselves temporal affairs, that attempt to draw time itself into a kind of territory.

Dirtiness is not an effect of space, it is itself the engine of space production. Perhaps spatialisation itself is an effect of pollution behaviour. This means that dirt is not an object but an action, the act of dirt-making, or what is called 'vilification', making dirty. The nomad leaves his dirt behind. For a nomadic people, dirt is the past, and purity is the future. Time is not so much the great healer, as the great cleaner. Once human beings settle and aggregate, we can no longer move away from our dirt, so we must move our dirt away from us. Dirt is no longer temporally distant, it is spatially distinct, no longer *back then*, but *over there*, no longer *ago* but *apart*. Hygiene becomes spatialised, cleanness

becomes space itself. The threat against which the me-ness, or mineness of the clear and distinct space defends is the threat of time, of the erosion of space itself. Dirt is crowding, the crowding in of the outside in the inside. Cleanness means having enough clear space around you, on the motorway, on the beach; it is *Lebensraum*.

And yet, as Michel Serres has observed in his book *Le Mal Propre*, cleanness, in the sense of mineness, can itself be invasive. The tiger secures his territory by marking it with his urine. If I want my soup to remain untouched while I leave the room, I make sure that everybody sees me spit in it before I go. I appropriate, make something clean for me, by making it dirty for other people.

*the clean [propre] acquires and conserves itself by means of the dirty.* Or, better: clean is dirty. Spit sullies the soup, the logo sullies the object, the signature sullies the page: *propriety, property*, the same antagonism uttered in the same word, with the same origin and meaning. Propriety leaves its mark, like a footprint. Observe, on the other hand – yes indeed! – that a hotel cleans its rooms in order to make them available for others. If not, nobody would stay there. Now, but the other way round, clean [*propre*] is equivalent to without an already-defined proprietor, free of access. To summarise: either clean means appropriated, but then means dirty; or clean really means cleaned [*net*], but then means without a proprietor. (Serres 2008, 7)

This is perhaps why the peoples who have been most despised as dirty, are often those who have been subject to oppression in the most literal sense, that is, to crowding together. The concentration camp creates dirt by reducing space, and thereby turns its very occupants into a kind of dirt, confirming the hypothesis of their dirtiness in the first place.

What is the cleanest part of me, the part that is most liable to contamination, and that must therefore be most carefully patrolled lest pollution enter in? Surely, my mouth, and precisely because that is the part of my body through which, in order to sustain my physical integrity, my apartness from the outside, outside matter must periodically enter. But, if what goes into my mouth must be clean, whatever emerges from my mouth is instantly dirty. ‘I hate dirty eaters’ thinks Leopold Bloom in *Ulysses*, as he looks at the men in the Burton eating rooms ‘swilling, wolfing gobfuls of sloppy food, their eyes bulging, wiping wetted moustaches... A man spitting back on his plate: halfmasticated gristle’ (Joyce 1986, 139, 138). The codes of behaviour that Norbert Elias

examined in his account of the civilising process depend very largely upon the control of such processes of intake and output. Nose-blowing seems to have had a particular importance in this process. From the early sixteenth century onwards, writers on manners and civility such as Erasmus began urging the use of personal handkerchiefs for emunctory purposes instead of sleeves (or tablecloths). Not only were handkerchiefs recommended, the specific ways of using them began to be prescribed. Giovanni della Casa urged:

And when thou hast blowne thy nose, use not to open thy handkercheif, to glare uppon thy snot, as if yu hadst pearles and Rubies fallen from thy braynes: for these be slovenly parts, ynough to cause men, not so much not to love us, as if they did love us, to unlove us againe. (Della Casa 1576, )

This magical capacity of the mouth to alternate meanings and values is expressed in the most complex way in the question of speech. Language, which is a compound of hardware and software, the sensible and the intelligible, physical form and abstract information, tends towards the clean as information predominates over physical form. Radio and TV voices are carefully cleaned out, which often means to say, dried out, of the admixtures of sibilance and plosiveness. When body predominates, language becomes raucous, crowded, bestial. Babbling is the sound of voice being drowned in pure noise, and whole languages have often been characterised as this kind of noise. The rivalry between England and the Netherlands in the seventeenth century gave Dutch the reputation of being a particularly thick and impenetrable language. The comic songwriter Charles Dibdin has a sailor complain of a preacher in these terms:

Why I heard the good chaplain palaver one day  
About souls, heaven, mercy, and such,  
And, my timbers, what lingo he'd coil and belay  
Why 'twas all just as one as high Dutch. (Dibdin 1790, I.153)

A similar logic produces the eighteenth-century appellation for frogs, 'Dutch nightingales' (and the Dutch seem to have been known as 'frogs' by the English even earlier than the French). A barbarian is one who is *barbaros*, a word which seems to mean something like babbling, and is related to Latin *balbutire* to stammer. The Berbers of North Africa were so named for a similar reason, that their language sounded to the Arab colonist like empty plabbering palaver. Hottentots were similarly named because of what was thought to be their stammering speech, full, to the Dutch coloniser's ear, of unintelligible clicks and clucks. All of these

names effect a kind of mimetic dirtying of what the Greeks knew as cacophony, literally dirty talk.

Very often, uncleanness takes a kind of doubled or proxy form, in a designation of the unclean through what others may fail to find disgusting, especially in relation to what they may habitually put into their mouths. Thus the French are identified with the frogs that are held to be their distinctive diet, and the Germans to Krauts, cabbages.

It is often suggested that we are repelled by groups or peoples who we feel to be alien, or 'other'. In fact, however, the particular kind of repulsion or hostility towards groups who are felt to be human arises from mixture and ambivalence rather than hostility or any directly adversary relation. It is not otherness or dissimilarity that produces hostility and suspicion, but rather minimal difference within near-similarity. The dirty is the quasi-identical. This may be why there is a particular loathing and contempt reserved for the betrayer and the apostate that is not usually directed at the simple infidel.

This may account too for the prominence of the idea of the parasite in ideas of cleanness. What characterises the tick, louse and mite is their closeness, the fact that they seem so close to the self, as to form a kind of second skin, or body-double. Indeed, as the example of delusional parasitosis demonstrates, in which patients become convinced that they are infested by bugs that are too small to be seen, parasites are often closer even than the skin, inhabiting the very beings of the persons so afflicted, more ontologically proximate than any insecticide can reach. Dirty people are those who themselves harbour such parasites. During the eighteenth century, Scotland was known as 'Itchland', from its reputation among travellers for harbouring pruritic diseases – indeed, a popular insult about the kilt was that it had been adopted by the pruritic natives of Scotland because it afforded speedier and more convenient access to itching private parts.

This may also help account for, or at all events, characterise the regular phenomenon of the rivalry between proximate or closely allied groups, often expressing itself in disgust and contempt as well as simple hatred: Jew and Arab, Catholic and Protestant, Arsenal and Tottenham, English and French. The one who is close enough to me to be mistaken for me by others is a kind of a smear or smirch on my identity. And, as time is the enemy of identity, for time always involves mixture and becoming, the one who dirties me is the one who embodies the possibility of my shading into some new state, the smearing or blurring of being by becoming.

Accordingly, ethnic groups who may themselves have the most highly, even obsessively-developed codes of cleanliness, are often themselves the target of propaganda or insult suggesting that they are dirty by inclination or lifestyle, and require to be cleaned up. This is one of the many parallels between Jews and Romani groups. It has often been remarked that Roma have no shared religion or religious writing in which to cement and perpetuate their identity; but the purity codes observed across different Roma groups scattered across different countries are both tenaciously persistent and consistent. The concern with the *moxado*, or the impure, as it is called among the Rom of England and Wales, is focussed on women, especially the lower parts of their body, with separate bowls and washbasins being provided for different parts of the body. One of the reasons why Romani families may resist housing schemes is the problem of the contamination or uncleanness of rented accommodation: a house occupied by a *gadzo*, or non-Rom, or with an unknown history, cannot be regarded as anything but an unclean dwelling. The focus on the uncleanness of women, which the Rom share with many other groups, is, once again, only superficially and epiphenomenally a spatial phenomenon. Surely one reason that women are the focus of pollution laws and behaviour is that women seem to embody the subjection of being to time. An unclean woman is not matter out of place, but time that is perpetually slipping out of joint. Against this, the strict patterns of segregation and cleaning establish a calendar of rhythmic oscillation that gives to time a structure and a syntax that reduces it to space.

The fact that the Rom are thought of as feckless, criminal and unwashed, despite this deeply ingrained concern with cleanness, is more than a mere irony. For we find in the close pairing or rhyming of the target group of vilification and the vilifications practised by that group an example of that hatred of the near-identical that Freud called the ‘narcissism of minor difference’. In a similar way, the elaborate interdictions on what creatures may be eaten in the Torah, and the careful and systematic codification of different kinds of food are grotesquely reversed in the anti-Semitic propaganda of the Nazis, which portrayed Jews not only as foully unhygienic in their personal habits and lifestyles – even to the postulation of the *fetor judaicus*, the distinctive odour said to be emitted by Jews – but as themselves a kind of vermin, fattening parasitically on the vitality of the German peoples alongside whom they lived.

The names of sectarian groups sometimes dramatise this dynamic of the clean and the unclean. The heretical sect known as the Cathars are so-



called from the Greek *katharos*, clean, or pure. The Puritans have been united repeatedly with prurience through a principle of lexical contiguity, for example in Brian A. Oared's comment that 'puritanism requires prurience, it mandates an obsessive, panoptical voyeurism directed toward the self and others - especially sexual selves and others. Puritanism and perversion feed off each other in an ultimate confusion of host and parasite' (Oared 2011).

Naming is itself often a way of reducing time to space, especially when it comes to disease. What seems to characterise disease is a kind of pure mobility, which sets at naught clean, once-and-for-all distinctions of here and there, home and away, and of no class of ailment is this more true than sexually-transmitted disease. Yet we regularly seek to assign diseases to places, attempting thereby to quarantine them in in their places of origin – French pox, the English disease, Asian flu.

Dirt is ambivalent in relation to time. On the one hand, dirt is the accretion of age, and the mark of the accumulation of time. Expunging dirt means annihilating the past, and making things new, again, climbing back up the slope of time. On the other hand, dirt is always futural, since it is always in prospect, being the mark of the exposure of object to the erosions of time. To clean is to deny both this past and this future, to refuse duration and the mixing that is its effect and signature.

Cleanness withdraws; dirt advances or invades. Cleanness encloses; dirt exposes. This is why alien peoples are so often characterised as themselves a kind of dirt. They embody the admixtures and corruptions of time. When we loathe or are revolted by the dirty other person or people, we are recoiling from the invasive or erosive temporality they embody. Dirt never sleeps; only cleanness can escape time, except that it never can – is anyone more a slave to time than the obsessive-compulsive handwasher? What is revealingly known as ethnic cleansing really involves an effort to expunge duration and becoming, to stop the clock or keep things from slipping back into the past. But there is no once-and-for all cleaning. Even though cleaning aims to turn time into space, duration into position, temporality throbs through it. The tiger and the terrier alike must endlessly renew their scent marks; we are driven to perform the act of what we call 'spring cleaning' as the year renews itself. If dirt and cleanness articulate space, perhaps it is even more true that they give shape and scansion to time. The dust that gathers on our shelves and surfaces, that we delight in thinking, wrongly, is made up of the sheddings of our own skin, is the clock that ticks out

our time towards the terminal and absolute condition of identity, and suspension of becoming: dust to dust.

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