



Historicizing the Modern European Excremental World-View



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Conceptual Paper

This conceptual historical paper outlines how excretion came to be seen as the lowest form of matter in the European history of hygiene, health, urban planning and in psychoanalytic theory. It traces the common symbolic imagery associated with excretory substances, processes and technologies, scatological humor and anal erotism in the history of ideas across the period 1850-1930. It examines the history of ideas about excretion as a symbol of money, class-distinction and social progress in late nineteenth-century psychoanalytic, ethnographic, urban-planning and popular press sources, in the history of sewers, constipation and scatological humor by tracing their common symbolic imagery in the history of European ideas. It reveals the way French texts in this period associated excretion with money, progress, class, race and colonial difference, comparing these ideas to Germanic and British examples. In so doing, it contextualizes prevailing social attitudes of disgust that continue to inhibit the application of successful treatments for the medical condition of Irritable Bowel Syndrome.

In one of the first academic studies of excretion in history, French historian Dominique Laporte[1] argued that the growth of early modern urbanization impacted upon European toilet attitudes through the creation of public and private spheres, resulting in new laws and taboos surrounding defecation. Similarly, the German sociologist Norbert Elias claimed that propriety in toilet manners was bound to civilizational development, and that the formation of state systems in the early modern period was a crucial moment in the emergence of sanitary customs [2]. Scatological humor in literature across European cultures in the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries suggests rich symbolic elaboration about excretion. In the nineteenth-century new forms of discourse about excretion focused on the importance of cleanliness and odorless, and on the health and hygiene of excretory habits. Scholars of hygiene and sewer history have typically explained the nineteenth-century shift simplistically as one of repression. For

instance, using the ideas of Freud and Elias, sociologist David Inglis argues that attitudes to excretion became more “negative” in the nineteenth century as a result of a developing bourgeois habitus[3].

In contrast to early modern visions, mid-nineteenth-century preoccupations saw excretion as a problem of civilizing progress, of class conflict and identity and of racial and difference. This discourse was particular to the period, and provides a clear example of how, contrary to the assumptions of many cultural theorists, excremental concerns are not identical across massive time spans and continents[4]. Throughout the nineteenth century European cities were confronted with excretion as a social problem due to the unprecedented urban population intensification of the industrial revolution. Concerns about disease and over-burdened sewerage systems contributed to the growth of interest in excretion in various forms of intellectual and popular writing. Cultural historians of France such as Donald Reid, David Barnes and Roger Guerrand have shown that nineteenth-century thinkers, press-writers and urban planners related urban filth symbolically to the working classes and focused on the need for odorless and clean cities as marks of “civilization”.

Throughout the nineteenth century sewers, excretion, filth, and muck had entered literary visions of class inequality from Emile Zola [8], France had a particularly excelled in this variety of metaphor. From the early nineteenth century the archaic system of collection pools and cesspits on which Parisian sewerage disposal relied became inadequate for the burgeoning urban landscape. As the historian, class tensions and popular unrest blended with questions of foul odor and disease in many forms of Parisian urban representation. Newspapers noted the relationship between cholera epidemics and revolutionary uprisings in 1830 and 1848. In 1831 the satirical artist Honoré Daumier depicted the reigning monarch Louis Philippe d’Orléans as a devouring Gargantua excreting the laboring

poor of the French nation [9]. Under the Second Empire, town planner Georges Haussmann led a major renovation of Parisian infrastructure that made it more amenable to state and police control, as well as cleaner and more congenial to middle-class lifestyles of shopping, strolling and café culture. Old narrow streets ideal for the building of barricades were widened to create an expansive network of boulevards less easily blocked off by crowds in revolutionary uprisings. Below ground Haussmann led a vast expansion and technologization of the sewers, and in 1861 these were opened for tourist visits, hailed as proof of France's greatness as a world empire, and analogies were made to the sewers of imperial Rome[10].

While Paris is perhaps the most striking example, scholars have also considered the politics and representation of sewers in other European cities, namely London and Vienna. As Christopher Herbert has noted, London's sewerage crisis in the late nineteenth century prompted similar symbolic associations between money, class and excrement. Weyer[11] has argued that while scientifically determined sanitation needs clearly drove sewage technologization across nineteenth century Europe, German sanitation discourses demonstrated cultural attitudes of disgust bound to class distinction. Alan Dundes [12] has claimed that Germanic cultures throughout the seventeenth to twentieth centuries have had particularly long-established traditions of anal obsession related to political drives for conquest. So, while France is rich in examples of discursive associations between money, class and excretion, the trend was also European-wide.

These contexts no doubt helped to produce the theory later advanced by Sigmund Freud of the anal-stage in psychological child development and its relationship to pecuniary drive. Among scholars who have applied psychoanalytic understandings to studies of excretion, scatology and hygiene, Freud's ideas about anality and excretion are commonly taken to be idiosyncratic. I have elsewhere considered the genealogy of Freud's anal theory by showing its relationship to earlier and contemporaneous ideas in ethnography (Moore, "Situating the Anal Freud," 2018 in press). Freud assumed the pleasurable sensation of defecation and of retention of excreta to be a primary infantile instinct[13]. He claimed that excrement symbolized money within the unconscious mind because the child's first gift to the mother was the renunciation of individual command over this pleasure to the requirement of toilet training. Giving up one's excrement was thus the child's first experience of relations of exchange and formed the basis of understandings about the value of money. Through the sacrifice of its excrement the child is first introduced to the need for sublimation of pleasure in order to conform to "civilized" society with its requirements of middle-class pecuniary drive. The development from childhood to adulthood echoed that of the social evolution from primitivity to modernity[14]. Hence money and excrement were for Freud "interchangeable" in the unconscious[12]. Excrement thus helped to construct the hierarchy of matter by which civilized man learned to distinguish that which was most valuable

from that which was valueless. This aspect of Freud's vision of the Oedipus complex has seldom been closely examined by Freud specialists and by subsequent psychoanalytic thinkers, although it is commonly invoked, outside its historic context, in humanities research on scatological imagery. To understand Freud's discussion of excretion it must be considered in the contexts of a broader consideration of nineteenth-century urban politics, ethnographic thought, and hygiene literature, as well as popular and literary examples such as the fiction of Emile Zola, Charles Dickens, Oscar Wilde, popular scatological texts and the fin-de-siècle French comic and flatulence performer Josef Pujol.

Freud also used metaphors of colonialism to discuss the relationship of the self to the libido[13]. Within broader critical readings of psychoanalysis, and in histories of sexuality, this dynamic has been discussed. Jean Walton & Ranjana Khanna [15,16] have argued that the Freudian vision of psychological development was an individualized mapping of ethnographic and colonial thinking onto a European vision of the psyche. Khanna explored this aspect of Freud's thinking in relation to the psychoanalytic tenets of dreams, the unconscious, gender difference, sublimation, melancholia, narcissism, ego and libido. Her work shows how profoundly ethnography impacted on Freud and on ongoing elaborations of ideas of the self through psychoanalysis such as in the work of Jacques Lacan and Slavoj & Žižek[16]. Prior to this, Anne McClintock [17] claimed that colonial relations were central to European histories of sexuality, bodies and gender by showing how ethnographic assumptions about childhood sexuality as primitive and excessive impacted on colonial regimes in Africa. Scholars such as Sander Gilman & Laura Doan [18,19] have discussed the importance of colonially imagined racial constructs in psychiatric thinking about sexuality in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Jean Walton has examined how colonial and ethnographic thinking helped to form psychoanalytic theories of female sexuality both in the work of Freud and in the work of interwar psychoanalysts such as Wilhelm Stekel and Marie Bonaparte. Similarly, the work of Ann Laura Stoler [20] has shown how colonial gender and sexual relations in Asia informed European metropolitan visions of bodies and desire. We might then similarly engage with the theoretical insights of these scholars while focusing on a different object: the psychoanalytic imagination of the anus, consequently opening a new conceptual space in between readings of Freudian selfhood as colonially constituted and historical scholarship that has identified a colonial dynamic within European visions of sexuality and bodies. Anjali Arondekar has hinted at a connection between colonial sexuality discourses and anal erotism in her work on colonial archives of homosexuality trials in India of the late nineteenth-century [21]. Such enquiries might be extended by asking how a European imagination of the civilized anus was constructed within the metropolis due to both the ethnographic and urban influences on Freud's thought.

Excretion was not a large concern for most ethnographic and anthropological writers in this period. However, it did

appear in the studies of John G. Bourke and Peter Beveridge and was also implicit in anthropological thinking about the lack of bodily restraint or appropriate sense of value among “primitive” peoples [22]. French, British and American ethnographic writers viewed excretory rituals in African, Native American and Australian Aboriginal cultures as signifiers of a primitive stage of development [23,24]. Colonial engineers further imagined excretion as bound to geographically located primitivity when confronted with sanitation problems in colonial settlements in Africa and Asia, and with the European proclivity to gastrointestinal illnesses when stationed in tropical countries [23]. These writers all considered excretory and bodily rituals in the African, Asian, Native American, South American and Australian Aboriginal cultures they studied.

The American ethnography enthusiast John G. Bourke, for whom Freud wrote a preface, scoured a wide range of published ethnographic texts and compiled a volume of references to excretion in “primitive” cultures studied by a vast number of ethnographic and anthropological writers from the seventeenth to late nineteenth century. The eating of excrement in particular fascinated Bourke as a practice unique to pre-modern cultures. For James Frazer, primitive culture was in part defined by an inverted system of value, in which “the conception of holiness and pollution” were “not yet differentiated” [23]. The use of excrement for ritual purposes was thus widely seen by ethnographic writers as a sign or symptom of the primitive failure to differentiate between priceless and worthless forms of matter. Such cultures were seen as being incapable of recognizing the “true” value and non-value of objects, which explained why, for example African cultures treasured shells and other commonly found objects above precious metals and labor-intensive produced goods, to the detriment of their social evolutionary development. We know that Freud was profoundly influenced by anthropological writing [24]. Thus, in the body of texts that Freud read and engaged with in his formation of child psychological development, the failure to mark excretion as taboo signified primitivity and arrested evolution.

Hygienic and medical interest in constipation also drew upon themes that related excretion to social evolution. As cultural historians such as Christopher Forth & Ina Zweiniger [25, 74] have shown, French, German and British concerns about hygiene of the body flourished in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and was frequently imbued with class and gender specification. While for some such writers, women were seen as more likely to develop constipation due to inactivity, for others, men’s constipation was seen as more worrisome because of the central role men played in the public sphere of civilized life. Referring to masculine constipation as “the white man’s burden”, early-twentieth-century British hygienist Frederick Arthur Hornibrook looked to images of healthy, fit “native” men as models of abdominal health [27-31]. Constipation texts typically insisted that it was “civilized” middle-class masculine life,

stressful yet sedentary, that resulted in intestinal stasis. These ideas, untested in their own time, have been largely confirmed by modern physiology in which sedentary lifestyles have indeed been shown to correlate with poor intestinal motility.

While there have been a number of major studies of modern European sewerage history [32,33], of nineteenth-century constipation discourses [33], of European hygiene history [34,35], and of scatological literature [36], no study has ever considered these concerns together under the rubric of the anus in the history of ideas. The fact that motifs of progress, civilization, class and money recur across all these varied discourses in modern Europe suggests that it is appropriate to rethink the history of excretion, hygiene, constipation and scatology according to a new historic framework. By discussing these visions together we can see how Freud’s apparently unique conception of the anus as the locus of civilized identity, pecuniary drive and class acculturation was grounded in nineteenth-century culture and ideas.

In the context of this history, we might also consider the unique figure Joseph Pujol, the “Pétomane” who appeared in a one-man flatulence show at the Moulin Rouge between 1892-1894. It is clear that in 1893-97 press interest in the various legal battles between Pujol and the Moulin Rouge focused heavily on the joke that Pujol made money from his anus, was being sued over his anus, and was attempting to sue for damages in regard to the theft of his flatulence-act concept. To my knowledge, aside from my own work [37], there is no scholarly or analytic work of any kind in English on the phenomenon of Joseph Pujol, and little in any language apart from a non-scholarly book by two French theatre journalists [38,39] and passing references in other non-scholarly works [40-43]. Discussions of Pujol in the work of Guerrand and Spinard approach him as a humorous anomaly in history, while the book by Nohain and Caredec is an entirely unreferenced body of research presented as a series of flatulence puns. Pujol too must be considered less as an historical aberration or as a humorous novelty and more as a typical example of late nineteenth-century discourses about the anus.

The Freudian vision of anal sublimation is situated clearly within a rubric of evolution toward sexual normativity. As part of the sexual fixation with the parent that constitutes the Oedipus complex, the Freudian child must learn to excrete on demand in lieu of reveling in the pleasure of retention. Late nineteenth century ethnographic, psychoanalytic and medical discussions of sexuality frequently refer to excretion alongside assertions about the relationship between civilizing progress and sexual desire. Ethnographic texts group excretory rituals of “primitive” peoples with practices of sexual non-restraint and excess. In urban planning discourses too sex and excretion were often coupled. The 1830s Parisian hygiene engineer Parent-Duchâtelet [44] considered prostitution and sewerage to be the twin evils that befouled the urban landscape. Other sexuality texts in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century also saw the anus

as an important locus of sexual potential that must be rejected for normative sexuality to be achieved. In 1906 Havelock Ellis metaphorised the process of sexual build-up and release as excremental and believed the close association of genital and anal pleasures resulting from the physical proximity of both organs was the origin of coprophilic desire[45]. The German naturalist Wilhelm Bölsch, whom Freud read, also argued that an anal sexuality characterized primitive degeneration [46]. In the work of psychiatrists, such as the Austrian pioneer of sexual science Richard von Krafft-Ebing, all forms of anal sexuality were categorized as degenerative perversions [47]. Thus, anal sexual pleasure was marked as retrograde in relation to evolutionary progress. The practice of inspecting anuses became the norm in psychiatric examinations to determine the presence of masculine sexual perversions from homosexuality to masochism. And in early twentieth-century psychiatric texts the persistence of anal sexual pleasure in women was argued to be a rejection of gender norms [48]. Curiously there has been very little discussion of excretion or of anuses among sexuality historians, with the exception of the literature scholar Jean Walton who has examined these themes in the work of Wilhelm [49]. However, historians of sexuality do not typically consider the history of sewers, constipation or scatological literature to be appropriate topics of consideration within the field of scholarship. Nor have scholars of the history of psychoanalysis attempted to contextualize Freud's excretory and anal concepts in any detail, even as they have done so for other aspects of Freud's thought [50,51].

As Anne McClintock, Ann Laura Stoler, Jean Walton and Ranjana Khanna have noted, psychoanalytic visions of selfhood and sexual desire have been encoded with assumptions about race and the relationship between colonized and colonizing subjects. By constructing the colonial other as sexually excessive and animalistic, European thinkers could imagine "civilized" sexuality as a lurking beast that must be pleasurablely restrained. Psychoanalysis traded heavily on this notion by mapping social evolution onto the individual's development toward sexual conformity, claiming that the sublimation of sexual perversion in childhood was a requirement of civilization. By discussing excretion in relation to this set of observations, the project will create a new scholarly conversation, connecting histories of hygiene in Europe to studies of psychoanalysis as a racial construct. Postcolonial scholars have recently begun to take a strong interest in ideas about toilet technologies and sewers[52]. But while such scholars have noted the racial discourses that haunt post-colonial cultures faced with these concerns, no connection has been drawn between these recent histories and the nineteenth-century discourses. Nor have the postcolonial critiques of psychoanalysis intersected with the new work on excretion in contemporary postcolonial cultures.

When scholars apply the ideas of Mary Douglas to the study of the Roman poet Lucretius [53], or of Freud to the Aztec god of ordure, [54] the relationship of the theorist to the object of study is a-historical. While Julia Kristeva has been widely

quoted as the theorist who invented the notion of "abjection", little attention has been given to the longer genealogy behind her ideas. Kristeva's ideas must be considered in relation to the 1920s psychoanalytic anthropologist Géza Róheim who elaborated on the Frazerian relationship between pollution and primitivity, arguing that attitudes to bodily muck in modern and primitive cultures were essentially different[55]. Modernity was characterized by "alloplastic" relationships of distance or abjection, while primitive peoples were disposed to "autoplasmic" reveling in the body and its substances[56]. These theories were critiqued by the structuralist anthropologist Mary Douglas in the 1966 work *Purity and Danger*, and this critique formed the inspiration for Julia Kristeva's discussion of excretion in *Pouvoirs de l'horreur*[57]. In a recent edited collection on "filth", William A. Cohen acknowledged that applications of psychoanalytic theory may be "transhistorical" but defended their usage in the study of unrelated cultures on the grounds that they allow us to understand how filth can be simultaneously valued and reviled[58].

Tracing the origin of Freudian ideas that relate excretion to sexual sublimation may be fruitful for debunking myths about excretion, progress and sexuality that persist in contemporary discourses as shown by Australian debates over water recycling in the first decade of the twenty-first century. In 2007 Australian Liberal Party politicians opposed water recycling in drought-stricken Queensland, misrepresenting scientific research on pollution as showing that recycled water caused the feminization of fish in European rivers, and implying that the reintegration of treated water into the potable water supply in Australia would result in deformations of gender such as reduced sperm counts or infertility among couples [59]. The topic of excretion in Australian society tends to be treated with symbolic myth and a lack of serious discussion, even as scatological humor is common in contemporary popular culture [60]. Historical contextualization has the potential to contribute to the growing body of scientific scholarship that encourages a less symbolically burdened understanding of the excretory organs and processes in the interests of improved digestive health among Australians [61]. The recent revival of practices of colonic irrigation as a naturopathic health treatment suggests the need to interrogate the origin of ideas about constipation and affluence, and about intestinal health and hygiene. There is a need to deconstruct the symbolic meanings associated with excretion that contribute both to prevailing social attitudes of disgust, and to practices of intestinal 'cleansing'. Some such attitudes clearly inhibit the treatment of bowel problems and may also contribute to their formation. Several recent studies have shown that the technique of Fecal Microbiota Transplant for treating Irritable Bowel Syndrome in which healthy stools from a donor are introduced into the bowel or digestive tract of the sufferer have spectacular rates of success in comparison to all other existing IBS treatments [62-65]. Digestive health researchers in Australia have been at the forefront of this treatment method [65-70]. But researchers complain that it is unpopular among sufferers of IBS due to forms

of squeamish inhibition derived from culturally formed attitudes of abjection [71-74].

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