

CHAPTER 01

Introduction

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This book has its origins in an ongoing series of interdisciplinary Animal Studies conferences (camels, elephants, donkeys, war horses and sponges) that, together with my colleague William Clarence-Smith, I have organised at the School of Oriental and African Studies since 2005.¹

In October 2023 we organised an international conference at SOAS bringing together self-styled shitologists from around the world. Tastefully entitled “**Merde Alors!**”, our conference was hosted by the school’s Food Studies Centre. The programme was thoroughly interdisciplinary in its span, and it soon became apparent that shit in all its ramifications was a matter of global concern, and thoroughly respectable in its academic credentials.

We had chosen the title “Merde Alors!” because the subject of our studies was literally unnamable in polite society. However, it was clear that our speakers preferred that shit should be called shit. And that is why the London book launch of this volume is occurring simultaneously with a special celebratory event. After discussion among the participants at the 2023 conference, a decision has been taken to establish a **World Shit Day**, to be celebrated each year on 18 November. There is a reason for that choice of date. It comes one day before the United Nations’ well-established **World Toilet Day** on 19 November. On the first day identify the problems; on the second day explore the solutions.

The purpose of World Shit Day is first **to name the unnamable** and bring it into the light of day as a suitable subject for academic and activist discourse; and second to open up the whole range of **problems and possibilities** that arise around excremental questions in our time.

Shit questions

When you sit down and start to map shitphobia in our society, all kinds of stories begin to emerge. The colleague who will only shit in her own toilet, or in the toilet of a very close friend. The other, whose bottom has not touched a toilet seat for the past three years. And the friend who took her five-year-old for her first day at school. The child told the teacher she wanted to do a shit. The mother was called in after school and was told that this word was emphatically not to be used, and that the child had to say “poo” or “Number Two”

Capitalism, however, does not shy away from shit. For the last two years, commuters on the London underground have been assailed daily by shit-related advertising posters. The first was shit-as-fear – the “Poonami” campaign mounted by Pampers nappies – a giant ghoulish blue figure of a piled turd with scary staring eyes. Grandma won’t be baby-sitting any more because the little one’s nappy was not leak-proof. The second – more recent – exploits the fact that the Brits are a nation of dog-lovers. Far and wide, the Fresh company is marketing a new brand of dog food based on the squash vegetable. Featuring the back end of a dog, the ads hail the product as “The Poo-Improver” and a solution for your dog’s constipation. Customers are even offered a canine version of the famous “Bristol Stool Chart” for daily monitoring of their dogs’ doings.

Big business also has an interest in how you wipe your bottom. Market research experts remember the toilet paper psychosis – mass panic-buying – that happened at the start of the Covid lockdown. The Australian company “Who Gives a Crap” has launched a big

UK campaign for the selling of super-large toilet rolls, with part of the profits allegedly going to Third World development charities. And for a while the moguls set about marketing wet-wipe bottom-wipers, tailored to appeal to Britain's Muslims concerned to abide by Islamic precepts regarding water-washing. (Wet-wipes were eventually banned by the government because they were clogging the nation's sewers.)

The Gaza war gave us the weaponisation of shit – the first target of Israel's onslaught onto the Palestinian territories was to hit the sewage and sanitation plants, thereby creating a defecation crisis that has since turned horrific, with disease on every hand. In international relations too shit has given cause for concern. In the summer of 2023 the newspapers were full of stories about how Britain's privatised water companies were pumping raw sewage into our rivers, poisoning wildlife and swimmers alike. This then threatened a cross-Channel war, with oyster farmers in northern France claiming that their carefully conserved oyster beds were under threat of pollution.

The French like to do it figuratively. During the 2023 general strikes against President Macron's pensions policy, towns all over France were plastered with posters proclaiming "*Nous sommes dans la merde*" [We are in the shit]. But the matter also became materially pressing. With the impending arrival of the 2024 Olympics, President Macron promised to clean up the previously unswimmable Seine so that swimming races could take place in its waters. He even offered to swim in the Seine himself, to prove its cleanliness. But he had to abandon his plan when activists launched a website inviting Parisians to poop in the river as their form of protest against his government.

Public Toilets

Interestingly, the last time that shit consciousness came to the fore in Britain was under the Thatcher regime. The Left at that time had been so thoroughly disempowered that the conversation at dinner tables turned insistently on the scandal of dog turds in the streets – the only thing, on our doorsteps, over which the Left could exercise power.

In India, however, shit has been a major electoral issue, with prime minister Modi's drive against "open defecation". The lack of provision of public toilets means that the poor have to relieve themselves in the street. A recent spoof video shows a huge water tanker, with a mounted water cannon and masked operators, driving through the streets of a big city. As soon as they see someone pissing against a wall, they blast them with the cannon. The intention is humorous, but it poses a real question: if people piss in the streets, who is to blame, the poor, or the public authorities who make no provision?

In London we lament the passing of those temples of copper, brass and marble that were the city's public conveniences. In Cambridge, home to the biggest and richest university in the world, if you want to relieve yourself and you are not one of the privileged college elite, you have to put up with a set of minimalist piss-holes at the local bus station, where the stink is so bad you need a gas mask. And in Finland, as our shitologist friend Justyna reports:

All public WC should be free!!! I noticed that dogs have more freedom! They can pee anywhere! But if I pee in the park I have to pay a fine! Where is the justice??? WC is now one pound sterling in some places! And in Finland you have to pay by credit card only! I had no credit card, only cash, so I had to sneak in when someone was leaving the WC!

It is not funny. It is a matter of serious social concern. The old, the poor and the homeless of our cities are driven into regimes of urine retention which are injurious for the human body. And – as has been documented in Africa by UCL's project *OVERDUE* [see Allen in this volume] – sanitation and toilet taboos are deeply gendered. They affect women disproportionately to men. To take one tiny example: in 2021 at the Women's Centre in the Dunkerque migrant "jungle" in Northern France, volunteers noticed that free disposable nappies were being requested even by women who did not have children. It

turned out that they wanted the nappies for themselves to use, because they were too scared to go out to the toilet in the night for fear of attack or rape.

Good enough to eat

Not all cultures are prudish about matters of shit. As the Moroccan proverb says, “one man's shit is another's factory of bliss”. Alfred Jarry offers an entertaining perspective on this in his *Ubu Roi*:

Père Ubu: *Eh bien, capitaine, avez-vous bien dîné?*

Capitaine Bordure: *Fort bien, monsieur, sauf la merdre.*

Père Ubu: *Eh! la merdre n'était pas mauvaise.*

Mère Ubu: *Chacun son goût.*

Aristophanes is equally forthright. His play *Peace* features two servants grinding up a big bowl of shit as food for the dung beetle that their master has acquired in order to fly to the heavens and talk with the gods. He appeals to the public not to shit or fart for the next three days in case the beetle should be distracted from its mission.

Gulliver on his travels, found himself up against the filthy, faeces-flinging bodies of the Yahoos. In Lilliput, Gulliver shits on the floor of his Lilliputian home and pisses on the Lilliputians' burning palace. Jonathan Swift gives us “Celia shits” – what a literary discovery! And William Burroughs' simopaths swing from the chandeliers and shit on the people. Likewise and *ibidem*: “A coprophage calls for a plate, shits on it and eats the shit, exclaiming: ‘Mmmm, that's my rich substance.’”

According to one commentator, it was the fact of Martin Luther straining his bowels in the tower of the monastery latrine that gave us the Protestant ethic. And then, as he felt death approaching, he said: “I am like a ripe shit, and the world is a gigantic asshole. We will both probably let go of each other soon.” He defends himself from sin by throwing shit at the Devil. And of course we should remember the roots and origins of our present civilisation in the Freudian interpretation: Money – shit – accumulation thereof – capitalism.

Shit in our rivers

I must declare a personal interest in matters shitological. At Easter I picked up a dose of E-coli from eating raw oysters out of a river in Devon. The body does a remarkable job of evacuating undesirable matter out of the back end. Three days that merited closer scientific, not to mention philosophical, study. However, the salient fact was that I had eaten stuff that had come out of somebody's backside. As the former Oxbridge rower discovered as he was sculling around the upper reaches of that river, it's easy enough to do; there were, he reported, human turds floating in the water. South West Water has a policy, during heavy rain, of dumping raw, untreated human sewage into the river.

As a result, the river's shellfish beds have been declared the most polluted shell fishery in the country, with South West Water named as the culprit. Ask Barry Sessions, the last remaining oysterman on the river, what he thinks of all this. The Environment Agency has just shut down his oyster farm (“winter precautionary measure”) and he is in danger of losing his livelihood. As he points out, the problem is not the oysters but the people who allow shit to be dumped in our rivers.

Surveying England's rivers – the property of the Crown – and the filth with which they are filled, we might like to ponder the words of that master of shitology and most prolific of scatologists, William Burroughs:

God save the Queen and a fascist regime ... a flabby toothless fascism, to be sure.
The Queen stabilizes the whole sinking shithouse and keeps a small elite of wealth

and privilege on top. The English have gone soft in the outhouse. England is like some stricken beast too stupid to know it is dead. Ingloriously foundering in its own waste products, the backlash and bad karma of empire.

And meanwhile we swim on among the floating turds...

Nobody can tell us that shit does not matter. And that is why we are publishing this book. Our mission, in short, is to encourage our readers into a spirit of boldness, exploration and experimentation in these matters.

It has taken 12 months of labour to prepare this book. The articles were assiduously collected, a process that involved some whipping of bottoms. They were fed into the editing machine, where they entered into the inner intestines in order to be rendered digestible. Now the moment has arrived to press the button and send the book to the printer. The sensation, and the satisfaction, if you will forgive me, is that of a large you-know-what.

To conclude, it remains only to say that we hope that the present volume brings you a little pleasure and a measure of academic interest. If you wish, you may download individual chapters from our website at:

www.geocities.ws/soasshitreader

There you will also find details of our next SOAS Shit Conference. It is scheduled for late October 2025, and it will be co-hosted by the Food Studies Centre at SOAS and The Bartlett Development Planning Unit (DPU) at University College London (UCL). We look forward to seeing you there.

Cambridge
1 November 2024

Note 1: www.geocities.ws/soasanimalstudies



Illustration 1: El caganer – traditional Catalan Christmas nativity figure.