

PREFACE

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In the realm of societal taboos, few subjects rival human excrement, a matter typically expunged from sight and mind once it exits the body. Scholarly attention on the topic has been sporadic at best. This interdisciplinary volume invites us to delve into a comparative exploration of the subject, revealing fascinating insights about the social, symbolic, and material aspects of shit.

The book is the outcome of a two-day conference held at SOAS University of London in October 2023, hosted by the Food Studies Centre. The Centre brings together members from across SOAS's departments to promote research and education on the political, economic, and cultural aspects of food. Over the past three decades, rich multi-disciplinary scholarship has expanded the study of food to examine not only its production but also every link in the culinary chain from farm to table—often stopping there. Yet, excrement represents the end of food's life cycle, or its afterlife, not only in our bodies but also in the economy, the environment, and society. Our handling of shit—its disposal, its categorisation in social discourse, and its return to us as odours, leaks, accidents, protest materials, agricultural resources, or infectious substances—sheds light on the relationship between food and the social and political body.

The declaration of World Shit Day on 18 November, born from discussions among conference participants, offers a moment to reflect on why shit merits its own day on the calendar amid the crowded world of themed days. Beyond the irony lies a serious intention: to destigmatise conversations around shit, and to examine not only how we dispose of it and how we might use it, but also what it reveals about our societies. Anthropological scholarship reminds us that taboos, far from being inherently unspeakable, become so through the process of social life. How we manage excrement provides a revealing lens for examining the boundaries of human interaction and social discourse.

The next SOAS Shit Conference will be held in October 2025, and will provide an opportunity to delve further into these themes. Across the range of disciplines studied at SOAS (and indeed at all institutions of higher education), a "shitological" lens may reveal how a seemingly mundane and avoided topic is embedded in the structures of society, culture, and knowledge. In economics and development, waste management is important for its ecological impact and the economy's material afterlife. In gender studies, the ways in which societies regulate bodily processes can reveal norms around purity, propriety, and the cultural delineation of gender roles. Moreover, exploring legal frameworks around sanitation and public health can deepen our understanding of how laws reflect and regulate these taboos, potentially reinforcing stigmas relating to gender, age, class, or disability. Even in fields like languages and music, a focus on excrement can shed light on euphemisms, metaphors, and cultural expressions, as well as the role of taboo in language development and the use of scatology in social commentary. This volume makes interesting interventions, such as the collected materials in Appendix 1 that eloquently map the underground repertoires of shit songs.

The collection of papers by scholars focusing on different periods of history, addressing the issue of excrement from multiple disciplinary standpoints across a remarkable range of topics, invites readers to contemplate, question, and re-evaluate their perceptions of human waste. The contributors grapple with the challenges of defining shit beyond its biological essence, examining how it shapes our societies, technologies, and ecosystems.



Illustration 1: London's first shit protest march. 3 November 2024