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*Poo wars as matter out of place: 'Toilets for Africa' in Cape Town*

**Guest Editorial by Steven Robins**

In the English summer of 1858, Londoners refused to leave their homes unless the government addressed the stench from the River Thames. An unprecedented heat wave had boiled centuries of accumulated waste into London's 'Great Stink'. Overwhelmed, Members of Parliament (MPs) proposed relocating from the newly-constructed Parliament building. Dousing the curtains with a mixture of chloride and lime had no effect. It was only when Parliament could no longer function because of the stench that legislators agreed to a systemic overhaul of the entire infrastructure of the Thames. The unbearable smell had compelled MPs to cough up the resources needed to provide a proper sewage system.

155 years later, community activists from Khayelitsha informal settlement on the outskirts of Cape Town were hurling portable toilet containers filled with faeces onto the N2 highway, in the departures section of the Cape Town International Airport, and on the steps of the provincial legislature. These faeces flingers from the urban periphery literally dragged the stench from the shantytowns to Cape Town's centres of political and economic power.

The protesters' grievances were ostensibly due to the city and provincial government providing shack dwellers with portable rather than 'proper', permanent, modern flush toilets. The 'poo protests' dominated the local and national media throughout the winter of 2013 and made international television news. Meanwhile the local and provincial government claimed to have conclusive evidence that the African National Congress (ANC) was using sanitation as part of its campaign issues to unseat the Democratic Alliance (DA) local and provincial government in the run-up to the 2014 elections. In a press statement, Sithembele Majova, a local ANC branch chairperson and leader of the protests, denied this accusation. Like the other 10 recognized leaders of the protests, he complained that these portable toilets 'cause a smell in the houses. It's unhygienic to live with poo inside the house... It remains in that container and that's why it causes that smell'. He added that 'we want the people who are living in those nice [upper middle class] areas like Constantia to feel how poo can damage your life when it is next to you' (*The Sunday Times*, 18 August 2013).

By taking their struggle to global sites of tourism, such as the Cape Town International Airport, sanitation activists had raised the stakes in the ongoing politicization of shit in the Western Cape (see Robins forthcoming). The authorities retaliated by charging them under the Civil Aviation Act and, in September 2013, seven of these activists were suspended by the ANC on the grounds of ill-discipline. The activists held their ground insisting that there was a sanitation crisis in the informal settlements in Cape Town, and that the provision of portable toilets was totally unacceptable. What they and the communities they claimed to represent wanted were 'proper' flush toilets; they did not want the lingering smell of shit in their houses. Offering them anything else was seen to be a racist confirmation of their status as second-class citizens from the African townships.

The response of the city of Cape Town's DA politicians and senior officials was to deny that these 'portaloo's' resembled the much maligned 'bucket toilets'. Instead, they were described as safe, hygienic, properly sealed, water-based and fully flushable toilets – referred to by officials as FFTs. Meanwhile, the national Minister of Health blamed the activists for creating a potentially lethal health hazard and the activists faced a 30-year sentence under the

Civil Aviation Act. Clearly, the smell from the urban margins was intolerable for the ruling political classes. Moving poo from the periphery to the centres of power had become a potent expression of discontent with poor service delivery in post-apartheid South Africa. Will the political classes take sufficient note of these demands for 'proper' flush toilets? Or do they need another 'Great Stink' from the periphery to waft into Parliament before they respond.

\* \* \*

So how do we make sense of this dramatic turn to a politics of shit in Cape Town? Mary Douglas's phrase 'dirt is matter out of place'<sup>1</sup> is one of the most widely travelled phrases in anthropology. Richard Fardon traces it to 'The Great Thames River sewerage debate' in *Punch*, 30 January 1858, during London's 'Year of the Great Stink', where Lord Palmerston stated that 'Dirt was only matter in the wrong place' (Fardon 2013: 25). Palmerston suggested that human waste produced in Britain's cities ought to be productively used as fertilizer in the countryside. As he put it, the dirt of the cities was simply matter in the wrong place; its proper place was in the fields.

Prior to the 16th century in Europe, human waste was usually dumped in the streets, fields or rivers. Then, in 1539, an ordinance was introduced in France that required that human waste be stored in the basement of houses. In his aptly titled book, *History of shit*, Dominique Laporte notes that France's 1539 Decree required that 'every individual or individual family hold on to personal waste before carrying it out of the city'. The consequence of this privatization and domestication of human waste is still with us today, and France's 1539 Decree is simply one of countless sanitary laws that have been introduced by states throughout the world.

In colonial Africa, as well as apartheid South Africa, states used sanitary and hygiene laws to displace the poor from the middle class city centres and suburbs, to the urban margins. Sanitation and politics have always been intertwined despite being framed by bureaucrats as purely apolitical and technical matters of urban infrastructure, planning, and public health. Numerous poor and working class neighbourhoods throughout the world have been demolished in the name of hygiene, sanitation and public health. Yet, political theorists and commentators have typically shied away from engaging with the political dimensions of human waste.

For European political theorists of democracy such as Hannah Arendt, the private domain of the household (the *oikos*), and everything that takes place within its walls, was not considered to be a properly political matter of public concern. For Arendt, a fiercely masculinist thinker, 'proper politics' consisted of debate and deliberation on public matters beyond the feminized domestic realm; private household matters such as defecation, toilets and sanitation did not qualify as 'political'. Yet, as sanitation activists observe, it is precisely the rape of women going to toilets at night that makes defecating in Cape Town's informal settlements so dangerous and *political*. It is also women who have to deal with the dire health consequences of children playing in spaces contaminated by raw sewage.

As for Jürgen Habermas, the early European public sphere that emerged from the 17th century until its decline in the mid-20th century, was an elevated discursive space of rational-critical debate that took place in civilized spaces of bourgeois coffee houses and salons. Such 'civilized' political deliberation was meant to transcend private interests and domestic concerns.

\* \* \*

If key European political theorists such as Arendt and Habermas ignored these more mundane, private and embodied conceptions of politics, are there any African political theorists we can turn to?

Most South African political commentators and party spokespersons agreed with the national Health Minister that flinging faeces in public places is a dangerous health hazard and a form of unruly and ill-disciplined behaviour without any real political content. But African political theorists such as Achille Mbembe (2001) have been far less restrictive in their assessments of what counts as 'proper politics'. Mbembe writes eloquently about the porous borders between the private and the public in his accounts of a West African 'politics of the belly' in terms of which the bodily fluids, private parts and orifices of 'Big Men' are more than game for public commentary, scrutiny, parody and ridicule by citizen-subjects.

In a somewhat different vein, Allen Feldman (1991) has written about how Irish Republican prisoners became cognizant of the potency of a 'politics of shit' when, from 1978 to 1981, they embarked upon the 'blanket protests'. These prisoners smeared their cell walls with excrement in protest against not being allowed to leave their cells because they had refused to wear prison uniforms as part of their struggle to be recognized as prisoners of war, rather than common criminals. Referring to prison uniforms as 'monkey suits', they wrapped blankets around their bodies. They used their bodily waste as a weapon in a struggle for political recognition.

These examples suggest that bodily fluids and functions such as defecation, perhaps *the* most private and intimate of household activities, can, under certain conditions, enter the circuits of public debate and political life. There are nonetheless historically constituted obstacles that may prevent such private matters from entering the domain of public debate and deliberative democracy. For instance, long histories of stigma and shame associated with excrement and open defecation, especially amongst the poor, have ensured that these matters are only gradually becoming part of what Arjun Appadurai (2002) and others refer to as a 'politics of shit' that is emerging in Asia.

In a book entitled *Shit matters*, Lyla Mehta (2010) writes about how the Community-Led Total Sanitation (CLTS) Programmes that began in Bangladesh have opened up such debates in rural villages, thereby challenging the silence and normalization of abysmal sanitation conditions in many parts of the developing world. Clearly, shit can become a matter of public concern. So what is the solution for these numerous sanitation crises in South Africa and elsewhere in the developing South?

Lord Palmerston was of course not alone in calling for human waste to be carted off from the cities to the countryside. In his writings in the 1850s, Pierre Leroux, one of the founders of French socialism, recognized the productive and ecological value of converting human excrement into manure. As he put it, 'Each and every one would religiously collect their own waste and hand it over to the State, that is to say to the tax inspector, in lieu of a tax or personal contribution. Agricultural production would immediately double, and destitution would disappear from the face of the earth' (cited in Laporte 1993: 127).

\* \* \*

In this regard, both Lord Palmerston and Leroux anticipated the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation's \$3 million 'Reinventing the Toilet' programme, which was officially launched in 2011. The Gates Foundation has funded teams of researchers at eight universities, including the University of KwaZulu-Natal in Durban, to come up with new toilet designs appropriate for developing countries. The target population is 'the 2.6 billion people in the developing world – 40 per cent of the world's population – who do not have access to flush toilets'. Africans without access to reticulated water and sanitation systems are to be given cheap, waterless toilets that can turn human waste into clean water and fertilizer.

1. Douglas (1966: 36) cited in Fardon 2013: 25.

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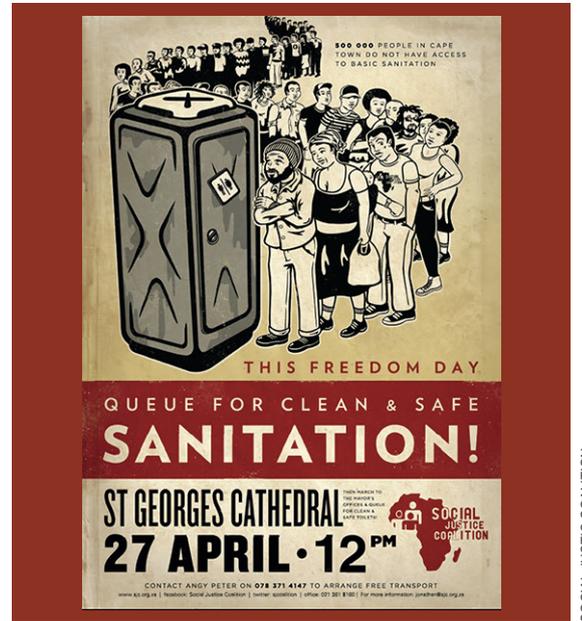
Mehta, L. & S. Movik (eds). 2011. *Shit matters: The potential of community-led total sanitation*. Warwickshire, UK: Practical Action Publishing.



**Fig. 1.** A protest in which toilet chambers are emptied over cars on the highway into Cape Town to draw attention to inequities in sanitation.

**Fig. 2.** A poster produced in 2011 by the Social Justice Coalition (SJC), a social movement working on sanitation issues in the informal settlements of Khayelitsha township on the outskirts of Cape Town. It was designed for a Toilet Queue Protest that sought to draw attention to the stark disparities between sanitation resources in affluent and poor parts of the city. The media coverage of the protests and persistent activism ultimately convinced the City Government to establish a janitorial system to maintain communal toilets in Cape Town's informal settlements.

Gates' 21st century humanitarian vision aims to meet the ecological imperative of transforming human waste into agriculturally efficient byproducts, i.e. manure and fertilizer. But these Gates-funded eco-friendly urine diversion toilets have been resolutely rejected by the residents of informal settlements in Durban who simply want modern, flush toilets, just like the ones in middle class homes. For them it is not simply a case of 'matter in the wrong place', but also a modernist aspiration for such matter to be flushed away. Similarly, for the poo flingers in Cape Town, the new portable toilets referred to as FFTs are simply old buckets in new containers. They allow the smell of shit to waft through their shacks while they cook eat, and sleep. They are also associated with everything about the apartheid past that the new democratic constitution claims to have overcome. By contrast, the porcelain flush toilet is a sign of modern citizenship in a democracy in which the disposal of human waste becomes the problem of state infrastructural systems; at the moment of flushing, shit then becomes matter out of sight and out of mind. This is the promise and expectation of democracy. ●



## Scientology's winning streak

Guest Editorial by Jonathan Benthall

Jonathan Benthall is an honorary research fellow in the Department of Anthropology, University College London. He is co-editor of Gulf charities and Islamic philanthropy in the 'age of terror' and beyond, due to be published by Gerlach Press next March. His email is [jonathanbenthall@hotmail.com](mailto:jonathanbenthall@hotmail.com).

Albeit not yet game, set and match to the Church of Scientology, it is certainly 'advantage Hubbard'. Despite the hostility of the French, German and Russian governments, the movement is recognized as a religion by the European Court of Human Rights and in many jurisdictions including the USA. In England, the Church's position was ambiguous, following the Charity Commission's rejection in 1999 of its application for charitable status, until a decision of the UK Supreme Court in December last year, when five judges ruled unanimously, in *Hodkin and another v. Registrar General of Births, Deaths and Marriages*, that a Scientology chapel in London was a 'place of meeting for religious worship' that could be registered as a place for marriage.

Ever canny in its use of the law, the Church had applied its resources to supporting the cause of a photogenic young couple, Louisa Hodkin and Alessandro Calcioli, who simply wanted to be married according to the creed in which she had been brought up. The doyen of human rights in Britain, Anthony Lester QC (Queen's Counsel), represented them. Lord Toulson, in his judgement given on behalf of the court, writes that for the purposes of the relevant act of 1855: 'I would describe religion in summary as a spiritual or non-secular belief system, held by a group of adherents, which claims to explain mankind's place in the universe and relationship with the infinite, and to teach its adherents how they are to live their lives in conformity with the spiritual understanding associated with the belief system. By spiritual or non-secular I mean a belief system which goes beyond that which can be perceived by the senses or ascertained by the application of science'.

Shouldn't anthropologists, you may say, be pleased that English law has dropped older definitions of religion with their Christocentric or monotheistic bias? And who could reasonably oppose this couple's desire to get married as they want?<sup>1</sup> Not only is *Hodkin* fully consistent with the principle of freedom of religion, but it should make it easier for other minority religious groups, less wealthy than the Church of Scientology, to gain the recognition they deserve. What about the Scientologists' reputation for mercenariness, and the controversy that they have provoked in many countries?<sup>2</sup> Well, the Roman Catholic Church has never been laggard in raising funds; and most religious movements have experienced difficulties with majority public opinion, even persecution, before becoming recognized.

It will be hard in the light of *Hodkin* for the Charity Commission to withhold charitable status from the Scientologists when they next apply for it. Charitable status would grant the organization substantial tax privileges as well as prestige. Recognition as a religious charity in Britain depends on the organization in question being set up not only 'for the advancement of religion', but also 'for the public benefit'. Some commentators opine that this will be a difficult hurdle for Scientology to surmount.<sup>3</sup> But its humanitarian commitments, including a detoxification programme and a criminal rehabilitation programme, will surely strengthen its case. The next step will no doubt be lobbying for equal time on Radio Four's *Thought for the Day*, and for representation in public interfaith ceremonies. Should anthropologists, who on the whole set a high value on diversity, object to this trend?

I am grateful to Professor James Beckford for providing me with information on the academic study of Scientology, but he bears no responsibility for my argument.

1. A complicating factor is the prohibition in English law against religious content being included in civil weddings. See <http://www.lawandreligionuk.com/2013/07/05/religious-content-of-civil-marriage-ceremonies/>.