

This is a post-peer-review, pre-copyedit version of the index, intro and a chapter published in *The Politics of Emotional Shockwaves*. The definitive publisher-authenticated version Falcato, Ana and Graça da Silva, Sara, *The Politics of Emotional Shockwaves*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2021 <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-56021-8> is available online at: <https://link.springer.com/book/10.1007/978-3-030-56021-8>

The Politics of Emotional Shockwaves

Edited by

Ana Falcato

&

Sara Graça da Silva

IELT and IFILNOVA are supported by National Funds through FCT - Fundação para a Ciência e Tecnologia - under the projects UIDB/00657/2020 and UIDB/00183/2020, respectively. The editors are supported by FCT under the contractual programme in accordance with articles 4, 5 and 6 of the Law Decree no. 57/2016, of August 29, altered by Law no. 57/2017, July 19.

Acknowledgments

When we initially planned to edit this book, we were far from imagining the social and political turmoil the world would be facing as we now write this short acknowledgment message, still quarantined at our homes. We would like to show our appreciation for everyone involved in the making of this volume of which we are so very proud. Inevitably, the covid pandemia affected everyone's deadlines, tested everyone's patience, and inspired a new take on what was already a challenging endeavor.

The number of chapters collected in this book, and their diversity, is a testament to the ever-growing and ebullient interest the topics of emotional and morality originate, especially in this political context. Our most sincere thanks to all the contributors for their enlightening chapters, patience and cooperation in these testing times. Thank you also to the editors at Palgrave for their professionalism and understanding during all the phases of the process, especially Lauriane Piette.

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Edited by Ana Falcato & Sara Graça da Silva

Bio-notes

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Sara Graça da Silva received her PhD from Keele University in 2008 with a thesis on the rich interplay between nineteenth-century science and literature: ‘Sexual Plots in Charles Darwin and George Eliot: Evolution and Manliness in Adam Bede and *The Mill on the Floss*’. She is currently Appointed Researcher at the Institute for Studies of Literature and Tradition, NOVA/FCSH, Portugal, working on evolutionary readings of literature. She has a large experience with working in an interdisciplinary environment, and has collaborations with Durham’s Centre for the Coevolution of Biology and Culture, and the Centre for the History of Emotions at the Max Planck Institute for Human Development. She has contributed to the *Victorian Literature Handbook*, *Dictionary of Nineteenth Century Journalism*, *Utopian Studies*, *Royal Society Open Science*, *National Geographic*, *PNAS*, amongst others, and has edited two volumes with Routledge on the relationship between Morality and Emotion: *New Interdisciplinary landscapes in Morality and Emotion*. Routledge (2018), and *Morality and Emotion: (Un)conscious Journey to Being*. Routledge (2016).

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Pablo Fernández is pursuing his Ph.D. on the phenomenology of disorientation at Institut Jean Nicod (ENS, EHESS, CNRS) in Paris, and he is a visitor at University College London, where he collaborates with the Philosophy Department, the Spatial Cognition Lab and the Bartlett School of Architecture. His work combines an interdisciplinary approach with philosophical methods, and his work has been published in venues such as *Journal of Consciousness Studies* and *Human Geographies*. He specialises in the phenomenology of space and in theories of cognition such as Distributed Cognition or the Predictive Processing framework.

Roberto Casati is currently the director of Institut Jean Nicod. In the last years he has worked mainly on the computational properties of shadow representations. His last book, the *Visual World of Shadows*, written in collaboration with Patrick Cavanagh, was published in 2019 with MIT Press. More generally, Casati has worked on theoretical problems related to cognitive artifacts in the framework of an extension and generalization of the "two modes" account of reasoning, which is meant to be an alternative to "extended mind" theories. A number of training- and field- projects are ongoing or planned. The main aim is to dovetail the cognitive mechanics underlying the use of artifacts (shifting, bridging, recycling, contracting...) in a unitary framework centered on the tradeoff between representational advantages. His present research is on wayfinding and navigation, and he is writing a book on the centrality of maps for cognition.

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including what and how emotional states represent the world around us, as well as epistemological questions regarding how emotions play positive and distinctive roles in the generation of knowledge. Laura is particularly interested in how these fundamental questions help shed light on the practical role emotions play, or ought to play, in our everyday and political lives.

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Hannah Bacon holds a PhD in Philosophy by Stony Brook University. Bacon's dissertation employs the work of Henri Bergson to present a durational conception of trauma and interrogates the consequences this would have for a Levinasian intersubjective ethics. Broader interests include aesthetics, phenomenology of embodiment, incarceration, care ethics, philosophy of race, gender and sexuality, and social and political philosophy. Bacon holds a master's degree in philosophy from The New School.

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Figure 1: Newspaper photograph of the body of Ulrike Meinhof.

Figure 2: Painting of the body of Ulrike Meinhof (Richter 1988)

Figure 3: Picture courtesy of Breaking the Silence

“You Stink!” Smell and Moralisation of the Other

Sara Graça da Silva

Although scholarship on the senses and sensory history has been fast expanding over the last decades, the importance of smell tends to be somewhat overlooked in favour of the other senses, in particular vision, already regarded by the likes of Plato as a superior sense. The ephemeral nature of smell, and the inherent difficulties in interpreting its sensory information, help explain this lack of attention. Smell is, however, one of the most intriguing senses, pivotal in the perception of ourselves and others, and deeply connected to our emotions and moral decisions. Medical and cultural historians, as well as anthropologists and psychologists, have emphasised the key role olfaction plays across time and place, not only through rituals, or as a means of diagnosing disease, but also as a warning mechanism regarding threats and dangerous environments, and ultimately, dangerous, stinky people (Classen and Howes, 1994, Reinartz, 2014, Jenner, 2011).

In *Hamlet*, Marcellus alludes to the state of political and moral corruption at Elsinore using an olfactory reference – “something is rotten in the state of Denmark”. Indeed, shared, familiar smells create a sense of identity and security, at both individual and group level, whereas the opposite leads to smelly feelings of distrust, avoidance and fear. In an increasing globalised world, smell is intimately connected to the politics of power, status and identity. Recent studies have shown that body odour disgust sensitivity (BODS) is commonly linked with authoritarianism and avoidance of “individuals and groups that are perceived as foreign, strange, morally deviant or norm violating” (Liuzza et al, 2018: 2). In this chapter, I revive Alain Corbin’s masterful distinction between “the foul and the fragrant” and use smell and

emotional olfactory experiences to explore negative attitudes towards certain societal outgroups, in particular migrants and refugees¹.

A Brief History of Smell

Before embarking on a more contemporary analysis of the relationship between smell and prejudice in regards to a negative framing of the foreign, it is important to present a brief contextualisation of the value of olfaction over time. After all, a history of smell is inevitably a history of humanity from ancient to modern times.

Among the many historians who have covered this evolution in their works, I would like to start by highlighting Alain Corbin's seminal *Le Miasme et la jonquille: l'odorat et l'imaginaire social, XVIII-XIX siècles* (1982), published in English in 1986 as *The Foul and the Fragrant: Odour and the French Social Imagination*. Corbin's book has become a bible in studies on olfactory perception, as well as an object of study itself. His examination represents a masterful exploration of eighteenth and nineteenth century developments concerning urbanisation and treatment of urban waste, hygiene (including its lack), and medicine, offering a contemplation of the evolution of these progresses and their impact on French society through a smelly lens. Along our lifespan development, both our own smell and our capacity to appreciate the scent of others, change. As Corbin notes, this odorific fluidity accompanies us from infancy to old age:

¹ It is important to distinguish between migrants and refugees. According to UN Migration, migrant designates "an umbrella term, not defined under international law, reflecting the common lay understanding of a person who moves away from his or her place of usual residence, whether within a country or across an international border, temporarily or permanently, and for a variety of reasons". A Refugee is, according to the 1951 Convention, "a person who, owing to a well-founded fear of persecution for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country; or who, not having a nationality and being outside the country of his former habitual residence as a result of such events, is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to return to it." <<https://www.iom.int/key-migration-terms>>

Human beings possessed a succession of smells from childhood to old age, from the milky sourness of the suckling to the sweeter, less acid, sourness of senility, a smell that Haller found intolerable. Between the two extremes was the fragrance of adolescence, particularly marked in young girls. Puberty, which radically transformed the odor of males and gave them the aura seminalis of the adult, did not change women's constant odor so clearly. "At that time their slack, rarely exercised fiber only dulls their childhood sourness and gives a stale and sweetish odor to their transpiration". Nevertheless, menstruation and, above all, sexual intercourse, temporarily altered the character of their smell. (Corbin, 1986: 38)

Corbin's fascination with smell is echoed in one of the most well known and successful novels exploring olfactory entanglements and disentanglements. Published in 1986 and seductively adapted to the cinema in 2006 by Bernd Eichinger, Patrick Suskind's *Perfume: the story of a murder* follows the (mis)adventures of the mysterious Jean-Baptiste Grenouille and his exceptional sense of smell. His extraordinary power is particularly captivating since he has no smell of his own to account for. Throughout the novel, Suskind plays with the readers' expectations and anxieties, providing incredible fictional olfactory illustrations. The opening description is terrifyingly poetic and I dare copy it below in its entirety for fear of losing the brilliance of its odorific magic:

In the period of which we speak, there reigned in the cities a *stench* barely conceivable to us modern men and women. The streets *stank of manure*, the courtyards of *urine*, the stairwells *stank of moldering wood and rat droppings*, the kitchens of *spoiled cabbage and mutton fat*; the *unaired parlors stank of stale dust*, the bedrooms of *greasy sheets, damp featherbeds*, and the *pungently sweet aroma* of chamber pots. The *stench of sulfur* rose from the chimneys, the *stench of caustic lyes* from the tanneries, and from the slaughterhouses came the *stench of congealed blood*. People *stank of sweat and unwashed clothes*; from their mouths came the *stench of rotting teeth*, from their bellies that of *onions*, and from their bodies, if they were no longer very young, came the *stench of rancid cheese and sour milk and tumorous disease*. The rivers *stank*, the marketplaces *stank*, the churches *stank*, it *stank* beneath the bridges and in the palaces. The peasant *stank* as did the priest, the apprentice as did his master's wife, the whole of the aristocracy *stank*, even the king himself *stank, stank* like a rank lion, and the queen like an old goat, summer and winter. (Suskind, 1987: 1, my emphasis).

Inhaling the fumes of the above passage certainly makes us dizzy: the numerous references to "stench; stank; manure; urine; moldering wood; rat droppings; spoiled cabbage; mutton fat; unaired parlours; greasy sheets; damp featherbeds (...) congealed blood; sweat; unwashed

clothes; rotting teeth; rancid cheese; sour milk”, etc., place us in an uninvited sensory dance that is bound to leave us breathless, and nauseated.

Historian of medicine Jonathan Reinarz has coined a beautiful expression to describe authors who are able to tie the sense of smell to that of lasting memories, such as Suskind does in the passage above. He calls these writers, including Charles Dickens or Émile Zola, “aromatic authors”, and I am incredibly fond of this formulation (Reinarz, 2014: 7). Indeed, memory and smell are intimately connected, as the following passage from one of the most celebrated Portuguese writers attests. In his *Book of Disquiet*, Fernando Pessoa takes us with him for a walk down the street:

*Smell is a strange way of seeing. It evokes sentimental scenes, sketched all of a sudden by the subconscious. I've often experienced this. I'm walking down a street. I see nothing, or rather, I look all around and see the way everyone sees. I know I'm walking down a street and don't know that it exists with two sides comprised of variously shaped buildings made by human hands. I'm walking down a street. The *smell of bread* from a bakery *nauseates me with its sweetness*, and my childhood rises up from a distant neighbourhood, and another bakery emerges from that fairyland which is everything we ever had that has died. I'm walking down a street. Suddenly I *smell the fruit on the slanted rack of the small grocery*, and my short life in the country – I can't say from when or where – has trees in the background and peace in what can only be my childhood heart. (Pessoa, 2001: 268, my emphasis).*

It is with some sadness that I recall finding out about a dear friend's inability to smell due to a childhood illness. Amazingly, I have never noticed her sensory limitation despite having known her for years until we went for a walk in the fields some years ago. As I began to describe these “sweet”, luxuriant fragrances with excitement, she lamented not being able to know what that felt like. Until then, I had never contemplated not being able to smell, nor had I paid much attention to being able to. Like many, I took smell for granted. There are, however, many studies that link the lack of a sense of smell to social insecurity and to difficulties in engaging in social relationships (Croy et al, 2012). Psychologist Rachel Herz, for instance, has shown that “odors that evoke positive autobiographical memories have the potential to increase positive emotions, decrease negative mood states, disrupt cravings, and reduce physiological

indices of stress” (Herz, 2016: 1). On the contrary, odours that elicit negative memories tend to lead to depressive dispositions.

The history of smell has been regularly relegated to a secondary plan in favour of other senses, such as sight or hearing. In his wonderful *Past Scents: Historical Perspectives on Smell* (2014), Reinartz provides a thorough historical review of the importance of smell which is worth reviving. According to Plato, for instance, smell was difficult to classify due to a lack of definite patterns, “most smells being half formed entities that occurred when substances were in the process of changing their state (...) the particular source of each odour was the condition of instability”, belief shared by Aristotle, who classified smells into five distinct categories: “sweet, harsh, astringent, pungent, and rich” (Reinartz, 2014: 8). For Christian intellectuals, smell existed “so that the devout could experience the goodness and beauty of divine creations” (ibid: 9). This demanded both the practice of the abnegation of sensorial experiences as a sign of a righteous moral conduct, as well as the condemnation of those who gave in to impulses, and were therefore labelled as impure and sinners. Reinartz adds that the correlation of smell and moral character was also impactful during the medieval ages, linking it to temperament and intelligence: “While those individuals who were wrathful and rowdy, rash and ignorant, were said to be ‘without a nose’, sagacious types were expected to possess a keen sense of smell” (ibid: 11). While the Renaissance period witnessed a general shift in the understanding of the role of the senses as important receptors “providing people with the necessary information to rationalize, discuss and respond to very specific situations”, smell, Reinartz remarks, continued to be perceived with general distrust due to a “lack of precision and reliability” (ibid: 12). A strong skepticism towards smell continued to be fostered during the Enlightenment with Descartes, Kant and Hegel considering sight as the most vital sense. Indeed, as cultural critic Laura Frost observes, “for Kant, smells – ephemeral and mostly foul– are associated with the masses and the irrational body. Olfaction was not thought to be

connected to aesthetics, and the pleasure it did produce was deemed too ephemeral to merit contemplation” (Frost, 2013: 36). There was a slight turn with Ludwig Feuerbach’s defence of the lower senses, including smell and taste, as instrumental “to intellectual and scientific activities” (Reinarz: 14). This smelly campaign was also supported by Nietzsche’s animalistic view. However, overall, the tendency in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries was to devalue smell, equating it with animals, savages, and degenerates. As historian Mark Jenner explains in his insightful “Follow Your Nose? Smell, Smelling, and Their Histories”, there was a negative association between “olfactory sensitivity” and “a lack of control over the emotions”, which seemed to suggest that “the sense of smell is inherently animalistic or instinctual and thus inclined to atrophy with civilization” (Jenner, 2011: 344). Both Reinarz and Jenner link this primitivization of smell to Freud’s suggestion that it had declined in status as a result of “humankind’s adoption of an erect posture”, idea he expands in *Civilization and its Discontents* (ibid). This civilizational exegesis had been already advanced by Constance Classen et al. in *Aroma: The Cultural History of Smell* (1994), another solid historical study on olfaction: “while sight was the pre-eminent sense of reason and civilization, smell was the sense of madness and savagery. In the course of human evolution, it was argued by Darwin, Freud and others, the sense of smell had been left behind and that of sight had taken priority” (Classen et al., 1994: 30).

The core thesis of Classen and her colleagues is very simple yet critical to this field of study: it proposes that smell is a cultural perception. This conviction was revolutionary and inspired subsequent historians, including Robert Jütte in his *A History of the Senses: from antiquity to cyberspace*, to conclude that “there can be no such thing as a natural history of the senses, only a social history of human sense perception” (Jutte, 2005: 9). Another scholar who has dedicated much of his work to the study of olfactory perception from a social perspective

has been Hans Rindisbacher. His discussion about smell and Karl Marx's belief that human perception is socially constructed is particularly enthralling. (Rindisbacher, 1992, 2015)

Increasingly from the Victorian period onwards, particular smells and strong odours, such as perspiration, became associated with the poor segments of society and the proletariat in general, whereas more sophisticated scents, such as soaps and light perfumes, were linked to the wealthy and aristocracy. Animalistic odours, quite popular until the eighteenth century, particularly "musk, a substance that comes from a musk deer's scent gland; ambergris, which is extracted from the excrement or vomit of sperm whales; and civet, from the anal gland of a civet cat", were steadily replaced in the nineteenth century and beyond by new standard: lightness and the "scent of cleanliness", which helped distinguish between whores and graceful, respected women even (Frost, 2013: 37-8).

The association of foul smells to disease and deviant behaviour led to a revolution in sanitary efforts during the nineteenth century. Edwin Chadwick, an acclaimed Victorian health reformer, is often cited in this context. His famous declaration that "all smell is, if it be intense, immediate acute disease; and eventually we may say that, by depressing the system and rendering it susceptible to the action of other causes, all smell is disease" is a reflection of the profound fear regarding the spreading of miasmas. This fear led to significant actions in governmental policies regarding waste treatment, including the implementation of sewage systems to eradicate possible sources of contamination and infection from urban spaces, and at the same time galvanised the fascination with the art of perfumery and the creation of lighter scents (Chadwick, 1846: 651).

Smell came to represent a sign of identity, status, and social class. As Corbin observed, "the atmosphere of bodies influenced human relationships at two levels: at the level of personal attraction or revulsion, and at the level of infection. (...) Animal scent belonged to the masses" (Corbin: 43, 76). Working classes were identified by a recognisable, primitive, stench, which

provoked a sense of repulsion in the higher classes, to whom the scent of the poor was almost intolerable. This disgust is well documented in reports of the time: “writings focused on the aspect of *narrowness*. The *crampedness* of the sleeping area, the depth of the yard, and the length of the alley created in the mind of the bourgeois (who normally had plenty of room) the impression of *suffocation*” (ibid: 153, my emphasis). Olfaction and deviance thus walked hand in hand. As the next section will show, this assumption continues relevant to this day.

“Ewwwww”: Smelly moral compasses

Many sensory historians have noted an emerging strand of research in recent years that has focused on how odour and its *waves* have been used to stigmatise social and ethnic groups in a multitude of contexts, from colonial to slavery and segregation studies (Jenner, 2011). In this final part, I will explore how the prejudices Corbin, Suskind and others observed in relation to the French proletariat and the masses in general, are still alive in contemporary society. Although these prejudices are aimed at copious sections of society for a variety of reasons (age, sexual orientation, disability, etc.), my discussion will focus on a specific outgroup: that of migrants and refugees. The aim is not to dwell on considerations over political responsibilities towards these groups, but rather to offer an examination of the expectations and perceptions towards this “other”, based on olfactory premises.

As a species, we use smell to make choices, to judge pleasant and unpleasant situations, and to avoid dangerous environments. The absence of smell is in itself an alarm signal. We have only to look at the present pandemic, where evidence for the loss of smell – known as anosmia, (and often associated with the loss of taste) – constituted a symptom of COVID-19 infection. Clean, fresh smells convey a sense of security and relaxation, whereas bad, strong smells promote feelings of disgust and avoidance. Research in moral psychology has long

investigated this matter. There is evidence of a strong correlation between clean smells and fairer attitudes, and of the role of olfactory stimuli to moral choices in general (Schnall et al, 2008; Liljenquist et al, 2010). Likewise, there have been many studies dedicated to inducing feelings of disgust which indicated a correspondence between unpleasant scents and a stronger predisposition for moral condemnation (Landy and Goodwin, 2015; Cecchetto and Parma, 2017; Inbar, Pizarro and Bloom, 2009, 2011, 2012). A recent study by Cecchetto et al., for example, showed that body odours, even when masked, make us more emotional (2019).

Over the last decade, and particularly since 2014, large-scale migration and refugee influx have become a challenge for many countries in the West. Sizeable groups of imaginably stinky people fleeing the wars in Syria and Iraq and attempting to cross the Mediterranean suddenly became a threat to national borders, to economy and culture, and most importantly, to identity. Notoriously, refugees and migrants usually arrive crammed in overcrowded makeshift boats that resemble nut shells, thousands drown, and the smell of death and decay inevitably accompanies their journeys. This crisis is all over the media, all over the world. Incidentally, I came across an analysis of various press reports about the coverage of one of the most emblematic episodes of the refugees' plight, that of the unlucky three year old Syrian boy who drowned at a Turkish beach whilst trying to complete the treacherous journey in 2015. The treatment of this episode by the various media outlets leaves no doubt as to the emotional shockwaves it created at a global scale:

As we complete this report, the front pages of newspapers across the world have been dominated by images of a drowned three year-old Syrian boy, washed up on a beach in Turkey after his family's attempt to reach Greece ended in tragedy. Broadsheet and tabloid, conservative and liberal, the image made the front page: 'Somebody's Child' read the simple red image caption of the *Independent*, picking out the colour of the boy's red t-shirt as he lay face down in the sand; 'Tiny victim of a human catastrophe', headlined the *Daily Mail*; 'Unbearable' reported the *Daily Mirror*. In Italy, 'A picture to bring the world to silence', reported *La Repubblica*. In Spain, 'An image that shakes the awareness of Europe', said *El País*. 'Aylan 3, experienced only wars', reported

Aftonbladet in Sweden, and in Germany's *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, 'Aylan Kurdi, three years old, drowned in the Mediterranean Sea'. Many outlets spoke of a 'turning point' for European migration politics or an 'awakening' in the awareness or consciences of the public. 'Everyone who saw these pictures last night could not help but be moved' said the UK Prime Minister David Cameron on *Sky News* (Berry et al, 2015: 5)

Aylan – that was the boy's name although he is mostly known as *that poor Syrian boy who drowned at someone else's beach/country* – was trending everywhere. However, despite the emotionally charged coverage, Aylan's fate always felt distant, removed, odourless. It obviously disturbed us but we were by then (and still are) so used to viewing these shocking images that we have become somewhat desensitized from it all. Furthermore, the danger was not really ours, nor was the smell. While we genuinely lamented his death, we also secretly rejoiced in the fact that this migrant "infection" did not happen on our shores. Sad as it was, he/them was/were someone else's stinking problem. When the stench is distant, everyone feels entitled to behave in a morally superior way, shouting indignation and anger from rooftops (mostly virtual from the comfort of our sofas). News channels opened and closed with Aylan's lifeless body splattered across the screens, and the world lamented his difficult life. We feel morally superior as long as we are not feeling the stench of urine and faeces of the refugee camps. Now, how disgusting would that be?

Also in 2015, a British nurse volunteering at the migrant camp with over five thousand refugees, infamously known as "The Jungle", in Calais, offered a shocking description of the migrant's dismal living arrangements to *The Nursing Times*, an online news magazine, which caught the attention of several media outlets. Her acerbic portrayal is populated with allusions to different smells, recalling Suskind's earlier odorific description:

The first thing that hits you is the *smell*. It's the smell of *rubbish, urine, faeces* and just *rot* everywhere. Then you see people coming out from places that you thought were just uninhabitable. There is *mud*, water and *dirt* running down worn-away paths, *flies everywhere* and seagulls circling above. (...) It's very *overcrowded*. In the camp, there are two water stations and 40 toilets, so that gives you an idea of the sanitary conditions. There has been an outbreak of lice and scabies. We're seeing *rat bites* and *infected*

wounds from where people have been walking through *dirt* and *human waste* (*Nursing Times*, 2016).

References to the smell of rubbish, urine, faeces, rot, dirt, infected wounds and human waste, paint a desperate picture. Additionally, her depiction also calls attention to a now familiar scene: that of the narrowness and overcrowding of the enclosures.

Studies have shown that people traditionally equate foul scents with social and moral corruption and defilement. This expectation deeply affects our perception of others (and ourselves), as well as our attitudes of both inclusion and exclusion. Importantly, this sense of disgust is not only aimed at refugees or migrants that arrive into our countries in passage while we wait for them to move on somewhere else. Immigrants who have long settled in our countries are also discriminated against. For the most part, this is because they seem to share the same narrowness of living of Corbin's proletariat masses. Again, narrowness enhancing the stench of fear and the sense of threat.

Psychologist Jason Faulkner notes that work on the history of stereotypes and prejudice has revealed a tendency to associate foreign peoples with disease, especially in the context of epidemic diseases, where particular ethnic outgroups are often blamed for the outbreaks (Faulkner, 2004). In the context of the current pandemic, as in any situation of crisis where the source of disease is ambiguous or invisible, suspicion and paranoia towards outgroups increase exponentially. In Portugal, for example, when news about Covid first broke, the Chinese community was stigmatised by locals, who mostly avoided their shops and warehouses like the plague. It is true when we say that ignorance breeds mistrust.

In the case of migrants or refugees, these are especially vulnerable to contempt and hate behaviours because of the scents associated with their existence. Many live in precarious sanitary conditions, bungled together in closed groups (physically, socially and linguistically), and it does not help that they are bearers of strange customs. Considered dirty, unhygienic, smelly people, forever foreign, the stench of their existence is often wrongly equated with a

moral stench, awakening in locals a primitive mechanism of avoidance which is explained by evolutionary psychologists as being linked to a fear of disease and infection.

The metaphorical association of cleanliness with morality and virtuous behaviour is deeply rooted in culture. One has only to consider everyday adages and expressions such as “cleanliness is next to godliness” or the importance of having a “clean conscience”, or a “clean record”. In a study about morality and physical cleansing, Zhong and Liljenquist found a psychological association between bodily purity and moral purity (Zhong and Liljenquist, 2006). They are also responsible for having coined the fantastic expression “The Macbeth effect”, which consists of the need to physically cleanse whenever our moral purity is under threat, normally after committing some sort of immoral action, which arouses feelings of guilt or shame. This denomination supports an embodied theory of morality and emotions, and was wittily inspired by the famous episode in Shakespeare’s play, where Lady Macbeth feels the need to wash her blood-stenched hands after her and Macbeth’s involvement in King Duncan’s assassination (Zhong and Liljenquist, 2006). Not surprisingly, there have been investigations that suggest that hand washing is essential to induce a clean state reaction in moral judgments (Kaspar and König, 2015). I can only imagine that the current pandemic has given rise to many mutations of this Macbeth effect (without the bloodied daggers, I hope). Washing hands has become an obsession in the fight of this terrible infection whilst disinfectant smells – smells of cleanliness – endow us with a sense of safety and protection. I do not remember ever having bought so many ethyl alcohol flasks, at such expensive prices. One thing remains uncertain, though, as Zhong and Liljenquist humorously put it: “it remains to be seen whether clean hands really do make a pure heart, but our studies indicate that they at least provide a clean conscience after moral trespasses” (Zhong and Liljenquist, 2006: 1452).

From the previous considerations, it is not difficult to understand why (im)migrants and refugees from specific vulnerable groups are at a position of disadvantage from the word go.

In 2018, far from imagining the situation we are faced with today, a group of scholars conducted a study on odour and prejudice towards immigrants. Their research suggested that our behavioural immune system scaffolding (BIS) is ruled by a psychological mechanism, “adapted to detect and avoid pathogen threats”, which translates into social relationships. Hence, as the authors of this study reported, “prejudice towards outgroups might be partially driven by implicit pathogen concerns related to dissimilarity of these groups’ hygiene and food preparation practices” (Liuzza et al 2019: 221). This thought provoking investigation linked body odour disgust sensitivity (BODS) to the emotion of disgust and xenophobic attitudes, suggesting that “prejudice might be rooted in primitive sensory mechanisms” (ibid). That is, at their root, feelings of uneasiness and disgust have an evolutionary explanation because they work as a protection against potentially dangerous, infectious and even lethal circumstances. Interestingly (but not surprisingly), previous research by the team also found a positive correlation between BODS and right-wing authoritarianism (Liuzza et al, 2018). In this line of argument, other important studies have identified a correspondence between the predisposition to feel disgust and conservative political attitudes (Inbar, Pizarro and Bloom, 2009).

The term *behavioural immune system* was coined by psychologist Mark Schaller in 2006, and has since been widely used in studies on human behaviour and stigmatisation. As Schaller acknowledges:

Many people suffering from infectious diseases also suffer from prejudice and social stigmatization as well. Importantly (and troublingly), the evolved design of the behavioural immune system can not only lead to the social stigmatization of people who truly are infectious but also to equally pernicious prejudices directed against people who are not (...) The behavioural immune system produces a somewhat different form of discriminatory sociality as well: aversive responses to subjectively foreign peoples. There are, of course, many different psychological sources of xenophobia and ethnocentrism, and some of these psychological processes have nothing to do with infectious disease; still, disease-avoidant processes apparently contribute to these discriminatory outcomes. There are at least two distinct reasons why subjective ‘foreign-ness’ may implicitly connote an increased infection risk. First, exotic peoples may be host to exotic pathogens that can be especially virulent when introduced to a local population. Second, exotic peoples may be more likely to violate local behavioural

norms (in domains pertaining to hygiene, food preparation, etc.) that serve as barriers to pathogen transmission. (Scheller, 3420-21)

What locals seem to forget is that exoticism is not a necessary condition for norm breaking. In fact, many “locals” are guilty of transgressing norms. However, perceptions of familiarity bring a sense of safety and belonging (that might very well be misleading), while threatening, strange foreignness evokes feelings of distrust and anxiety, and this perception impacts on anti-migrant attitudes and movements. The foreign is, therefore, depicted as somewhat filthy. We keep going back to Corbin’s distinction between the *fragrant* and the *foul*. The *us* and the *them*. The *good*, the *bad*, and...the *stinky* (might it be that we are all somewhat smelly?).

It has become commonplace to argue that today’s history comes deodorized, in a civilized effort to eradicate stench of various kinds (one can almost picture STENCH as the villain in a Marvel adaptation: *Stench by name: reeks by nature BAM, POW, ZAP*). Invariably, smells are intimately linked to our emotions: clean ones are normally associated with positive judgments and decisions whereas bad scents trigger feelings of aversion and disgust in our body and, ultimately, in our social behaviours and attitudes towards the other. However, it is also important to remember that the meaning of a bad smell is not straightforwardly universal but culturally dependent. What constitutes an unpleasant odour for some, might represent a pleasant one for others. Nauseating smells are not only putrid scents or a rotten cabbage left in the fridge (having found one yesterday, I know what I am talking about). In this chapter, I tried to demonstrate the role smell plays as a trigger of emotional memories, both positive and negative. Beyond the undeniable objectivity of stinky odours, which is real, the perception of smells is ultimately associated with feelings of unfamiliarity, distrust and foreignness. Regarding the smell of the other, we must learn to shy away from vicarious smelling and *wake up and smell the coffee*, opening our olfactory receptors to the world.

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