

Research Note

Sociology of Waste in Christian Europe and Japan:

Comparative Analysis of the Notion of Human Waste

Marta Elzbieta SZCZYGIEL

Osaka University, Graduate School of Human Sciences, Ph.D. Student

This essay examines sociological theories of waste, applying them to *human waste* in the contexts of Christian Europe and Japan. As the paper will show, notions of excreta in Christian tradition and Japan differ significantly, which sets perfect conditions for a thorough analysis of sociological theories of waste.

Although we all create waste in our everyday life, sociology has long ignored this topic. Recently though, we can see some increased interest in the problem. In order to establish a theoretical framework for the emerging field, some scholars seek inspiration in Mary Douglas's *Purity and Danger* (1966), but along the way, they have tended to transform her idealistic concept of dirt as a "matter out of place." Douglas argues that it is possible to analyze a culture through its primitive rituals and beliefs. With reference to her work, I first characterize the way excrement is portrayed in the religious beliefs of the two cultures analyzed in this essay: Christianity and the two main religious systems of Japan, being Shintoism and Buddhism. Then, inspired by O'Brien (2008), I explore three directions in which the sociology of waste followed Douglasian theory as reminder of death, pathogenicity and civilizing process. I analyze how each interpretation works in contexts of Christian Europe and Japan. As these notions were created based on Western examples, it is not surprising that they seem accurate in a European paradigm, but when seen through the lens of Japan, their validation proves problematic.

Keywords: Sociology of Waste, Excrement, Comparative Analysis, Mary Douglas, Religion

Introduction

Waste is unarguably a part of our everyday life. In recent years, caused by the population growth and rapid urbanization, it is becoming a more and more problematic, thus significant one. But as O'Brien argues it is widely ignored in contemporary sociology.

It is as if, for the discipline of sociology in general, and for sociological theory in particular, nobody ever throws anything away or ever carries out the bin-bags for a 'waste management authority' to deal with. It is as if, when you go to a shop, restaurant, club or place of work, you work, consume or take your leisure without ever producing rubbish or detritus of any kind. Sociology treats 'waste' as if it were literally immaterial, as if it existed in a world apart from the one we inhabit in our daily, routine lives (O'Brien 2008: 62).

Although we can see increased interest in the problem (Fagan et al. 2001; Murray 1999; O'Brien 1999; O'Brien 2008; Yearley 1995), waste is still understudied and lacks acclaimed theoretical frameworks. Here many scholars look for inspiration in Mary Douglas's famous book *Purity and Danger* (2003).

For Douglas dirt is a “matter out of place”, a matter of disorganization which “offends against order.” It means that it is not actually a physical entity, but a socially constructed concept. This claim “has inspired some of the finest scholars to dig into the cultural articulation of uncleanness and persuaded some ... that what is true for dirt is also true for waste” (O’Brien 2008: 125). But, when those scholars apply Douglas’s anthropological theory to modern sociology, they tend to modify her original idea so that in the end not much is left from her idealistic concept.

In this essay I examine sociological theories of waste applying them to the most familiar kind of waste to every human being – *human waste*. Inglis (2001) contends that in modern societies excreta are seen as dirty, thus “sociology of excreta and excretion may be oriented upon the same lines as a sociology of ‘dirt’” (Inglis 2001: 17). Influenced by O’Brien’s *A Crisis of Waste? Understanding the Rubbish Society* (2008) in which he describes five main directions in which Douglas’s theory of dirt was taken, I identify three paradigms through which the genesis of modern attitude toward excreta can be analyzed: as reminder of death, as pathogenicity and as standardization of bourgeois fecal habitus. As a point of reference for the above theories, I start from Douglasian analysis of human waste. For comparative purposes I offer analysis of the images of excreta in Christian Europe and in Japan. Social forces shaping the attitude toward human waste in both societies followed significantly different trajectories, which sets perfect conditions for evaluating the usefulness of prominent sociological theories of waste. As these theories are based exclusively on Western examples, it is not surprising that they are plausible in European paradigm, but when analyzed from Japanese perspective, they prove invalid. Therefore, this essay highlights the importance of considering non-Western cosmologies in order to create any comprehensive theory.

1. Theoretical considerations in the study of waste

First, I need to explain that in Douglasian terms there is one flaw in the framework proposed in this essay. According to Douglas, every “primitive culture is a universe to itself” (Douglas 2003: 4), therefore we can understand primitive cultures through their rituals and cosmological patterns. Modern culture, on the other hand, which she describes as a mix of “different fields of symbolic action” (Ibid.: 70) does not follow the same logic. Therefore, Douglas argues that it is possible to analyze a culture through its beliefs only when it is a specific culture. I, however, examine excretory customs across Christian Europe, arguing that we can trace the roots of Western ideas about excreta to beliefs and practices commonly shared across regions dominated by the Christian religion.

The Christian conversion of Europe was a thousand-year-long process, which formally ended in 1385 when the new grand duke of Lithuania was baptized in Krakow and later married the Catholic Princess of Poland. With this dynastic merger Lithuania joined the medieval Christendom and thus unified religious beliefs of the Old Continent (Hendrix 2004: 1). As in this example, conversion often came from the top down. When a ruler was baptized the whole country would automatically be converted to Christianity, but it does not necessarily mean that subjects would instantly change their folk beliefs. Research on the history of paganism shows that even when Christianity became the official religion, pagan practices proved difficult to eradicate (Dowden 2000; Jones and Pennick 1995; Milis 1998). For example Willibald, an 8th century bishop of Eichstätt in Bavaria, commented that “the devotion of the people to Christianity and religion” died out simultaneously with power of the dukes who protected them (Hendrix 2004: 4). Based on such accounts Hendrix contends that “Christianization was sporadic, not continuous and ... it was difficult to bring the campaign to the end” (Ibid.: 4). Therefore, in order to enhance Christianity, both leaders and missionaries of the early medieval Church decided to incorporate pagan beliefs and practices rather than repress them (Flint 1991). As a result, medieval laic Christianity can be characterized as a blend of folklore, superstition and Christian beliefs. Moreover, Hendrix (2004) persuasively argues that the sixteenth century Reformation in Europe actually aimed to “Christianize the Christendom”: people would get baptized, go to churches, and practice piety externally, but it was mostly out of fear of hell and hope for heaven. Reformers, by which Hendrix means not only Protestants but also Radicals as well as Christians, strived to “reform the rituals of late-medieval piety in conformity with sound doctrine” and to renew devotion to be “sincere and less tainted with superstition” (148) – in summary, to make European Christendom truly Christian.

My point here is that generalization of the whole continent is difficult because Christian conversion also

included the incorporation of varied local folk beliefs. Moreover, in Douglas's terms, Christian Europe falls into the modern culture category, thus making it impossible to understand through the culture's rituals and cosmological patterns. Nonetheless, Bayless (2013), in her analysis of medieval Christian scatology, shows that the attitude toward filth and excrement was generally standardized throughout Christendom. Moreover, Larrington (2006) reveals excremental metaphysics used in the process of Christian conversion of the Scandinavian north. Most of the practices associated with pagan beliefs, such as eating horse meat or animal sacrifices, were relatively easy to eradicate, but the Church could not stop the custom of listening to tales of the pagan past. To stigmatize such old heroic tales, the church reframed them, portraying pagans as the Devil's associates, and using scatological associations to induce aversion to the pagan stories. Therefore, although Christian practices remained varied between regions, when we consider excrement, prior research shows the negative attitude was universal in European Christendom.

Douglas's approach is a call to confute the ubiquitous Western ideas on dirt and pollution. Applying modern sociological theories of waste to concepts of excreta in Christian Europe, which was the root of the so-called Western civilization, and Japan, which remained relatively free of Western influence until 1853, I offer insight into what the Western-centrism Douglas argued against looks like in modern sociological theories. To sum up, I argue that including Christian Europe in my comparative framework allows this paper to theorize an overall image of excrement.

2. Excrement in religion: Douglasian approach

Douglas' groundbreaking work, *Purity and Danger* (2003) was the first one to pay attention to the way that notions of purity and impurity shape each culture's understanding of the world and how they are reflected in societal structures. Her interest in the topic sparkled when she analyzed purity laws of ancient Jews codified in Leviticus. It had been assumed that such laws were set to enforce proper sanitation and hygienic standards, but Douglas noticed they rather formulate distinctions between notions of clean and unclean. Thus, Douglas contends that humans' primal urge to separate clean from unclean reveals pollution symbols in each culture's "elaborate cosmologies" (Douglas 2003: 5) and not, how it had been assumed, unconscious pursuit of hygiene: "[i]f we can abstract pathogenicity and hygiene from our notion of dirt, we are left with the old definition of dirt as matter out of place" (Ibid.: 35). Cultures deem something dirty not because it essentially is, but because it functions as such in their cosmology; symbolic meanings of dirt precede the system – "they express it and provide institutions for manipulating it" (Ibid.: 114). Therefore, according to Douglas, what is clean and unclean is different across cultures, but she admits that there is a strong tendency to name bodily refuse as "a symbol of danger and of power" (Ibid.: 121). She argues that it is because bodily refuse comes from orifices of the body, thus destroying its integrity. "[A]ll margins are dangerous" (Ibid.: 122) as they represent social boundaries and systems of segregation. "Spittle, blood, milk, urine, faeces or tears" (Ibid.) traverse the boundaries of the body and become a matter that belongs neither to the inside, nor the outside – they stand in the middle as "the by-product of a systematic ordering and classification of matter" (Ibid.: 35). Thus bodily refuse destroys inside/outside boundaries of the body, but they also metaphorically symbolize inside/outside of society, as well as the ultimate distinction between me and the other. Excrement, urine or blood are dangerous because their transitionally has the power to "confuse or contradict our cherished classifications" (Ibid.: 36).

Moreover, as a Durkheim follower, Douglas contends that religion functions to support a certain worldview and to maintain social order and solidarity in complex societies. Therefore, by reading religion through the lens of rituals, symbols and bodily practice, we can understand "peoples' views about man's destiny and place in the universe" (Douglas 2003: 29). Following this structuralist approach I will analyze how excreta and practices for dealing with it are portrayed in the Christian tradition and Japan's two main religious systems, Shintoism and Buddhism.

First, let us see what the Bible says about excrement.

Deut. 23:12 You shall have a designated area outside the camp to which you shall go.

Deut. 23:13 As part of your equipment have something to dig with, and when you relieve yourself, dig a hole and cover up your excrement.

Deut. 23:14 *For the LORD your God moves about in your camp to protect you and to deliver your enemies to you. Your camp must be holy, so that he will not see among you anything indecent and turn away from you* (NIV 2011).

Whenever people start living in groups the problem of what to do with human waste arises. It is not surprising then, that such guidelines are in the Bible, but it is clear that the above extract deals not only with where to defecate, but more than that defines excreta as something “indecent” that might make God turn away.

Moreover, in Ezekiel of the Old Testament, we can see that human waste was symbolic of defilement for common people.

Ez:12 *Eat the food as you would a loaf of barley bread; bake it in the sight of the people, using human excrement for fuel. Ez:13 The LORD said, "In this way the people of Israel will eat defiled food among the nations where I will drive them."*

Ez:14 *Then I said, "Not so, Sovereign LORD! I have never defiled myself. From my youth until now I have never eaten anything found dead or torn by wild animals. No impure meat has ever entered my mouth."*

Ez:15 *"Very well," he said, "I will let you bake your bread over cow dung instead of human excrement."* (Ibid.)

Bread baked over human waste repulsed the Israelites on sight of it, the same way that God was repulsed by the Israelites' excreta. Ezekiel's strong reaction to God's plan portrays his disgust toward human excreta, but fortunately the merciful Lord decided to change it to cow dung, which proved to be lesser evil.

The Middle Ages were suffused with excrement, literally and metaphorically. Bayless (2013) points out that excrement has always been lowly, degrading and disgusting, but there is one difference between present attitude and the one in the Middle Ages: people used to take their shit seriously.

The essential dichotomy in Christianity is the body-soul dualism: humans are composite beings with an immaterial soul and material body, where soul is imagined as a pure entity, the core of the self, while the body is nothing but a profane, earthly container for the spirit (and shit). Claiming authority over and controlling corporeal areas of life such as eating, sexuality, burial and so on was the Church's innovation (Robb and Harris 2013: 160) and in turn it propagated and enforced the notion of sinful body. Although body is generally inferior, further division can be traced: the upper part as close to God, and the lower part as associated with Devil, is another common theme in the symbolic order of the body. This division is clearly seen in Sir John Harington's *Metamorphosis of Ajax*, published in 1596:

*To God my pray'r I meant, to thee the durt.
Pure prayr ascends to him that high doth sit.
Down fals the filth, for fiends of hel more fit.* (Bayless 2013: 1)

As we can see, God is associated with high and pure, while Devil encompasses low and sinful. Therefore Bayless convincingly argues that excrement “was not only a symbol of sin or a consequence of sin: it *embodied* sin” (Ibid.: xviii).

Excremental stigma is ever so present in literature outside the Bible and its exegeses of the time. In the Middle Ages, the Church was the unquestionable source of power and everyday life was dictated by it and Christian beliefs. It is not surprising then, that religious themes were predominant in medieval literature and art and that they carried negative attitudes toward excreta. For example, Dante in his 14th century *Divine Comedy* describes one of *bolgia* (ditches) of the Eighth Hell as steeped in human waste.

*Here we stopped; from it, in the ditch below
people I saw plunged in a stinking sty
whose filth from human privies seemed to flow*

*And while I scanned its bottom with my eye,
One I observed completely capped with shit-
If clerk or layman, could I not descry* (Torrance 2011: 231).

As excreta are synonymous with sin, some great minds dwelled on what will happen when our earthly body is resurrected. Thomas Aquinas hypothesized two options: intestines will not rise again, or if they do, “they will be full, not, certainly, of shameful superfluities, but of noble humors.” (Bayless 2013: 26) And who else is to blame for our earthly defecatory martyrdom than Adam and Eve? Franciscan Francisc Eiximenis explained that “if Adam had not sinned ... then he would not have the need to hide his shamefulness, because even though man would still have to empty his bowels through the natural opening, it would not stink nor would it have that shamefulness” (Ibid.: 27). A hundred years later Immanuel Kant elaborated on the ancestral sin. In *The End of All Things* he holds the whole world as a *cloaca* – a gigantic toilet.

As our first parents were overcome by lust after this fruit – despite the prohibition against tasting it – [sic], there was no other way to keep heaven from being polluted except to take the advice of one of the angels who pointed out to them the distant earth, with the words: “That is the toilet of the whole universe,” carried them there in order to let them do what they had to do, and then flew back to heaven leaving them behind. That is how the human race is supposed to have arisen on earth.” (Kant 1794 in Menninghaus 2003: 57)

Ultimately, the question of whether God defecates or not was also explored. Voltaire ironically commented that it is nonsense to believe that God created man in his image, as he has no body, thus he could not defecate (Corbin 1986: 29). Jung, the founder of analytical psychology, was haunted by a vision of God defecating on the Basel Cathedral and breaking its roof in, which left him on the verge of a mental breakdown. Young Jung (he was twelve at the time) felt shame because of such sinful thoughts and bottled them up, refusing to share them with anyone (Papadopoulos 1992: 197-198).

Christian condemnation of excreta created a social stigma around the topic, regardless of one’s religious belief. Even if a person is not Christian, but was brought up in a country suffused with Christian tradition and symbolism, there is a high chance that he or she will share such values ingrained in the everyday life. Even though the Church’s influence weakened with time, diffusion of Christian values into society and their presence until the present day is the legacy and undeniable proof of its power. That is why for 19th century Western “civilized men”, the toilet has become something that should not even be mentioned, as Freud notes in his 1913 foreword to the German translation of John G. Bourke’s *Scatalogic Rites of All Nations*.

For us there remains a trace of the Earth embarrassing to bear... [We] have chosen to evade the predicament by... denying the very existence of this inconvenient “trace of the Earth” [and] concealing it from one another, and by withholding from it the attention and care which it might claim as an integrating component of [our] essential being (Dawson 1998: 3).

Of course Freud means defecation, but his roundabout use of a quote from the angels in *Faust*, suggest that he also fell victim to this “trace of the Earth” anxiety.

In Japan, on the other hand, we cannot find similar condemnation of excreta either in Shintoism, Japanese ethnic religion, nor in Buddhism, practiced in Japan from at least the 6th century. The earliest source for the Japanese Shinto beliefs is *Kojiki* (712), the oldest extant historical chronicle of Japan. While in Christianity human waste is equated with sin and the Devil, in the Japanese creation myth gods are born from excreta.

Because [Izanami-no-mikoto] bore this child [the fire god], her genitals were burned, and she lay down sick. ... Next, in her faeces there came into existence the deity PANI-YASU-BIKO-NO-KAMI; next, PANI-YASU-BIME-NO-KAMI. Next, in her urine there came into existence the deity MITU-PA-NO-ME-NO-KAMI; next WAKU-

MUSUBI-NO-KAMI (Philippi 1969: 57).

The names of the feces gods mean “gods who protect the fertility of the earth”, while the urine deity is the “goddess of the propitious leaf” (Watanabe 1989: 28-29) – their names reflect the importance of excreta in Japanese agriculture, where it was used as fertilizer. Similarly, in Japanese folklore a toilet god (*kawayā gami*) was strongly associated with fertility. It was held that pregnant women should clean the privy so they would bear beautiful children. Furthermore, if you offer the toilet god *sekihan*, sticky rice steamed with red beans, you would have an easy and safe labor (Japan Toilet Association 2015: 160). Although it is highly questionable if people still believe in the toilet god, it continues to bring a nostalgic feeling about the older generation, which might be why Uemura Kana’s “The Toilet God” (*Toire no kamisama*), a song about Uemura’s grandmother telling her to clean the toilet, became one of the 2010 bestsellers.

Another connection between the toilet and childrearing in Japan is “privy worship” (*secchin-mairi*). In some parts of Japan, most notably in East Japan, parents would take a newborn child to the lavatory and pretend to feed waste to the baby. It was believed that this ceremony would make the child strong and beautiful (Ibid.).

Kojiki portrays further associations between toilet and fertility. The extract below tells one unconventional love story.

The daughter of MIZO-KUPI of MISIMA, whose name was SEYA-TATARA-PIME, was beautiful. [The diety] OPO-MONO-NUSI-NO-KAMI of MIWA saw her and admired her. When the maiden was defecating, he transformed himself into a red painted arrow and, floating down the ditch where she was defecating, struck the maiden’s genitals. Then the maiden was alarmed, and ran away in great confusion. Then she took the arrow and placed it by her bed. Immediately it turned into a lovely young man, who took the maiden as wife, and there was born a child named POTO-TATARA-ISUSUKI-PIME-NO-MIKOTO (Philippi 1969: 178-179).

Japanese Buddhism takes a more pragmatic look at excreta than Shinto. For example Dōgen, probably the most well-known Japanese Zen Buddhist priest and a prominent writer, described extensively how to act in the lavatory in one chapter of his *Shōbōgenzō* from the 13th century.

Dōgen holds that in temples it is absolutely necessary to establish “the eastern quarter” (*tōsu*), which is the Buddhist name for toilet. He gives very detailed descriptions how to use the lavatory, such as joining ones hands to honor *Ususama Myōō*, Buddhist guardian of the bathroom, snapping one’s finger three times before squatting, which hand to use to clean oneself after defecation and so on. He stresses out how important it is to keep oneself clean.

In the Procedures for Cleanliness in a Zen Temple it says, “If you do not wash yourself clean, you cannot truly take a seat in the Meditation Hall or bow to the Triple Treasure. Also, you cannot accept bows from others.” And in the Great Scripture on the Three Thousand Forms of Everyday Behavior for Monks it says, “If you do not clean yourself after relieving nature, you are committing an offensive act. You cannot truly sit upon a monk’s pure cushion, nor can you truly pay homage to the Triple Treasure. Although you may bow, you will have neither happiness nor merit from doing so.” On the basis of these quotations, you should put this matter foremost when you are training in the temple. (Dōgen 2007: 62, translated by Nearman)

As we can see, Dōgen acknowledges excrement as something materially dirty. Staying clean is very important in Buddhist tradition and we can trace beginning of bathing culture in the country to the spread of Buddhism to Japan in the Nara period (710-784) (Merry 2013). Therefore it is understandable that cleaning after defecation was seen as necessary and without it one could not “truly sit upon a monk’s pure cushion” – it would dirty the cushion, quite literally. But in the metaphorical sense, excreta are not defiling.

Those folks who are poorly informed fancy that the Buddhas have no forms of dignified behavior for using the lavatory, or they imagine that the forms of dignified behavior for the Buddhas in this world of ordinary beings are not the same as those for the Buddhas in the Pure Lands, but this is not what 'learning the Way of the Buddhas' means. (Dōgen 2007: 62)

Dōgen clearly states that those who think that Buddhas do not use the lavatory are mistaken as even the ones in the Pure Lands, the celestial realm or pure abode of the Buddhas, need to defecate. Thus excretion is not the line that distinguished sacred from profane – it is not *kegare*.

In Japanese culture, *kegare* is a state of pollution or defilement. The notion of *kegare* is present both in Shintoism and Buddhism, but what is defiling differs between the two. The biggest difference is in the handling of death, which in Shinto is probably the strongest pollutant, while in Buddhism it is just another step in the circle of life. Nevertheless, in Japan concepts from Shintoism and Buddhism have intermingled and equally shaped social practices. The best example is the division of religious rituals within one household and around one individual: Japanese traditionally take a newborn child to a Shinto shrine as a rite of passage, but rely on Buddhist temples for burial rites. It is because death is not defiling in Buddhism, thus it is adequate to hold the ceremony. But what I want to highlight here is that no religious system in Japan classified excreta as *kegare*. Feces are materially dirty and were treated as such, but, contrary to the Christian tradition, they were never seen as defilement nor pollution.

Thus, the attitude toward defecation in Christianity and Japanese religions is indeed quite different. As stated at the beginning of this essay, I am aware of the variety obscured by use of the broad category “Christian Europe”, and without doubt there are some important regional differences. One prominent example would be Germany. Dundes (1984), surprised by frequent mention of excrement in German culture, which he does not find in other Western cultures, suggests this phenomena is a trait of the German scatological character.

Dundes’s essay was not well received. First, he attempts to describe the German “national character”, which has mainly racist connotations, especially when put in the German context. But Dundes himself explains that he “[does] not believe that national character is biological or racial in nature ... [nor] geographically or climatically determined” (Ibid.: 4). To him it is “a cluster of specific personality traits which can be empirically identified” and he turns to folklore to find them (Ibid.: 4). I believe this should rebuke any critique, as national character, according to Dundes’s definition, can be said to equal the outcome of socialization. Socialization, as the process of inheriting norms, customs and ideologies dominant in a certain society, is an academically acclaimed process and one of its results is the knowledge of what topics can be mentioned and which should be avoided. In some societies people learn it is acceptable to talk about feces, while in others it remains taboo.

Second, as long as Dundes uses innocent children’s games or proverbs in his analysis, the research is deemed plausible, but as he moves to more serious examples, such as scatology in the Holocaust, he faces severe critique (Ibid.: vii). Personally, I am also wary of identifying scatological shaming and violence as a part of the “German character”, as it has been practiced by other nations to degrade “the Other” (for example Anderson 1995). Moreover, Dundes’s tracing the popularity of sausages and chocolate to their similarity to turds (108-112), although supported with some data, seems far-fetched to me. Still, I believe that Dundes is up to something in his analysis. When I asked a German colleague if people in Germany really call their infants “*Min lütten Schieter*”, which means “my little shitbag” (Ibid.: 18), I was told that it still might be so in some regions, but nowadays it is definitely not a mainstream way of referring to babies. But this is because, my colleague added, all that babies do is poop in their pants – well, no one is defying that. But, I would say, this is exactly the point Dundes is trying to make! Not only German babies poop, but the idea of calling them a shitbag does not seem to be a universal one, and at least so alien to some people that they would mention it in their book.

In addition to Dundes, other research also mentions German attitudes toward excrement. For example, Mead Skjelver argues that the Reformation era in Germany was abundant in scatological references and that it “bears much responsibility for the scatological bent to modern German culture” (Mead Skjelver n.d.: 6). The leader in this field, or borrowing from Schmidt and Simon, a “theological shit-spreader,” (Ibid.: 6) was Martin Luther. He is the author of many juicy quotes such as “I am like a ripe stool and the world’s like a gigantic anus, and so we’re about to let go of each other” (Gritsch 2009: 84). It is interesting to note that scatological references come mainly from

the Lutheran side. Mead Skjelver highlights that the Catholic part of the conflict also struck back with the scatological, but the volume or intensity were nowhere near that of the Lutherans. Although further research is needed, I suggest that looking at the process of Christianization of the Germanic tribes might provide some answers to their alleged scatological fascination.

Ricci (2015) points out three characteristics of the conversion of German tribes. First, pagan German beliefs were deeply connected to nature and just as in Greco-Roman religions, Germanic cults associated their divinities with features connected to everyday life (Innes 2007: 78). Second, medieval German tribes were extremely diverse, with different dialects and tribal laws. Moreover, those tribes were scattered across the countryside, without good connections, which made it even more difficult to introduce Christian thought (Ibid.: 36). Finally, as mentioned before, pagan beliefs did not die out instantly and missionaries had to incorporate them into the Christian religion to convert the people (Flint 1991). Based on the above, it is plausible that medieval German Christianity had significant regional differences and that, at least in some regions, strong connections to nature outlasted the conversion. This might explain why human feces became an economic good, just as it did in Japan. Night soil in Germany expressed the wealth and status of a household. It was collected in front of the house, so everyone could see it, and it even played a big role in seeking a marriage partner – the more shit in your house, the better catch you were (Dundes 1984: 12-16). Therefore, I suggest that the complicated process of Christian conversion in Germany did not eradicate the pagan affinity with nature, ergo manure could become a valuable good instead of condemned as dirt. Because of everyday contact with excrement, it naturally became a part of the German worldview, which Dundes calls the German scatological character.

Notwithstanding the above regional differences, the fact that an extremely negative attitude toward excrement pervades the Christian tradition remains unchanged. As stated before, the only difference between modern and medieval attitudes toward excrement is the seriousness with which the topic was handled: in the Middle Ages excrement was a serious concern for the people, but nowadays it is mentioned almost solely in vulgarized or satirical contexts. Stallybrass and White (1986) suggest that the symbolic “bourgeois world-view” was built around “high”, meaning refined and sophisticated, and “low”, for example dirty or noisy, discourses. Of course, the bourgeoisie attributed “high” discourses to themselves, while the “low” ones were characteristic of lower classes. But what is most important here is that the “high” discourses basically embedded the superiority of “Mind” and “Spirit” over the body with all its attributes (Inglis 2001: 50; Stallybrass and White 1986: 191). Thus, the bourgeoisie simply reproduced the Christian body-soul dualism, along with its scatological ideas, and, as the dominant class, standardized this concept. I argue that the reason for mostly vulgar, eventually comedic, connotations of excrement in modern times is the legacy of above-mentioned process.

On the other hand, scatological topics are widely present in Japanese culture, but similar condemnation of excreta cannot be found. On the contrary, in some cases long dependence on night soil resulted in a kind of glorification of excreta. Watanabe Shōichi, professor emeritus at Sophia University, links it with the feeling of security Japanese get from their ancestral roots:

Our parents were raised by their parents; by eating rice and vegetables fertilized by their excrement we live on the excrement of parents in our turn. We exist in the world as a result of our parents' bodily existence. We can say our own bodies exist as a result of the circulation of the excrement of our forefathers, or, as we would say now, its recycling (Watanabe 1989: 25).

The evidence presented above suggests that the striking difference between the image of excreta in the Christian Europe and Japan lies in the religious beliefs of these groups. Christianity arrived in Japan only in the middle of the 16th century and for a long time Christians were repressed. In 1871 the freedom of religion was introduced but Christianity never gained as much popularity as it did in the West. The lack of large-scale conversion, as well as the lack of Christian influence in politics, made the penetration of Christian norms impossible in Japan. Nonetheless, I do not mean to say that the positive image of excrement remains in Japan until this day. I argue that what shaped the present understanding of excrement in Japan are the influence of foreign norms and post-World War II social engineering, but as this phenomena goes beyond the topic of this essay, I will not elaborate on it further.

3. Sociological theories of waste

Above I have analyzed how Douglas's theory of waste works in contexts of Christian Europe and Japan. Now let us see how Douglassian theory has been transformed to create a theoretical framework for the sociology of waste.

O'Brien in his *A crisis of waste?: understanding the rubbish society* (2008) introduces five directions in which the idealistic Douglassian theory of dirt was taken: reminder of death, pathogenicity, civilizing process, socio-cultural value system and "post-modern reading of 'Western culture'" (O'Brien 2008: 133). Out of these five categories, three, namely reminder of death, pathogenicity and civilizing process, can be used to analyze human waste for the purpose of this essay. As for the other two, their theoretical assumptions disqualify excreta as the object of analysis. Therefore, let us see how notions of human waste in Christian Europe and Japan both conform to a broader framework of sociology of waste.

(1) Reminder of death

McLaughlin (1971) in his description of attitudes toward waste and concepts of cleanliness in Britain through the ages acknowledges Douglassian dirt as a "matter out place", but later elaborates on the theory. In support of his argument he gives a vivid account of 17th and 18th century Europe, which he calls a "stinking Hell" (McLaughlin 1971: 155) – streets were virtually open sewers and people used to throw their waste on the street which included emptying their chamber pots. After water closets became popular in London, people started to install them, but at first they were not connected to anything to take the filth away, and later improvements consisted of connecting them to the Thames, the main source of drinking water for the city. I will leave the obvious consequences unspoken to protect the faint-hearted. McLaughlin notes that this shocking difference in sensibility toward waste is the proof that dirt is a relative and culturally constructed notion, just as Douglas argued.

McLaughlin names bodily excretions as the ultimate dirt. Following Sartre (1993) he suggests we feel horror when we encounter bodily excretions because of their sliminess, which makes them hard to remove, thus blurring the boundary between self and other. He notes that people are relatively tolerant of their own waste, but when faced with waste of the other, they fear its polluting feature. For him, the reason humans see waste as dirt and try to distance themselves from it is because it symbolizes "degradation and decomposition of life", simply speaking: death. At this point his theory drifts away from Douglas's: McLaughlin advocates for a universal symbolism of death that turns waste into dirt – the idealistic relativism of separated symbolic cultures that is the basis of Douglas's theory is gone.

As McLaughlin points to bodily excretions as the ultimate dirt, ergo ultimate symbol of death, it is more than justified to use human excrement to validate the theory. As shown above, in Christian tradition there is a deep-rooted condemnation of excreta and the reason for it might be the fear of death as McLaughlin claims. Let us think of the digestive tract and the symbolic transformation food goes through from mouth to anus: humans consume food to stay alive, just as they breathe and defecate for that matter, but eating is the only physiological action that people do consciously. Thus, food becomes the symbol of vitality. Eating has become a social ritual and much attention is paid to the way food looks like, with some cuisines rising meals to the level of art. But as soon as food is consumed its transformation into a stinky brown pulp starts. Beautiful turns ugly, healthy gets pathogenic, holy (upper body) goes sinful (lower body) and finally life becomes death – this makes sense.

But if we look at Japan, finding similar association between excrement and death is difficult; quite the contrary, there are many examples where excreta are closer to the "life end". Describing religious beliefs in Japan I showed that in the creation myth gods come to life from excreta and I also mentioned some associations found between the scatological and fertility in the Japanese folklore. In Japan night soil was in popular use from the 12th century and by the 18th century it became an economic good that was even stolen by poor farmers (Hanley 1987)! Saying that Japanese agriculture developed thanks to night soil is not an overstatement, and even the Shogunate officially instructed its use in *Keian ofuregaki*, a proclamation issued by the Tokugawa Shogunate in 1649 to regulate farm life (Heibonsha sekai rekishi jiten henshūbu 1955).

Finally, there is no better example of excreta's life-giving connotation than a 1909 article from the *Journal of Japanese Agricultural Studies* stating that "Feces is created and depends on people and rice depends on feces.

Rice is excrement and in a way excrement is rice”, followed by the philosophical “If we think about the connection between the two, you are indirectly consuming feces when you eat rice” (Kushner 2010: 147).

(2) Pathogenicity

The second theory of why waste is seen as dirt is its pathogenicity. Van Loon (2002) in his interpretation of Beck’s risk society thesis names waste as the “most universal, vulgar and banal example of ecological risk in everyday life” (Van Loon 2002: 105). He sees it as an “uncontrolled matter out of place” (Ibid.: 106) that poses a threat to our life. Van Loon notes correctly that waste and disease are often linked and points out that it was the realization that microbes present in feces, not miasmata, caused cholera, typhoid and other diseases that plundered Europe, that became the driving force for building sewage system by the end of the 19th century and improving sanitary standards. Theorizing waste he argues that “[t]he excessive nature of waste returns to haunt the present as past-waste becomes present-toxicity” (Ibid.: 108).

The biggest change Van Loon posed to Douglasian “matter out of place” lies in the core of Van Loon’s argument – that is, its pathogenicity. Douglas argues that “[i]f we can abstract pathogenicity and hygiene from our notion of dirt, we are left with the old definition of dirt as matter out of place” (Douglas 2003: 36). She argues that the idea that notions of dirt and pollution originate in people’s comprehension of pathogenicity and hygiene is a faulty idea found only in the West.

First, as shown in the analysis of Christian attitudes toward excreta, it was common to avoid feces even before the connection between excrement and disease was known. Second, undeniably pathogens present in feces can cause disease, but if handled correctly excrement can be useful and even save life as fecal transplantations show. Japan supported the “handle with care” attitude toward excrement. In 1889, after the germ theory became a fact in medicine, Nagayo Sensai, the first head of the Sanitary Department of the Japan Home Ministry, and W. K. Burton, consultant engineer for the Sanitary Department, proposed the construction of a sewer network in Tokyo.

Night soil is a necessary fertilizer for farmers and as such night soil from the city of Tokyo can be sent to nearby prefectures for a potentially high price. Therefore we see no need to follow the example of Western cities and discharge it into the sewer pipes. (Tokyo Metropolitan Government Bureau of 1978: 82) [Author’s translation]

In the end the proposal was postponed while the funds that were available were focused on the water supply system instead. Moreover, in 1900 the first Filth Cleaning Law (*Obutsu sōjihō*) was established, but it excluded human excrement from the list of waste that was to be cleaned (Hoshino 2008). Nonetheless, the above proposal proves that even after the world became aware of possible dangers of excrement, in Japan it had too high value to simply dispose of it.

It is true that by the 1930s authorities voiced a strong need for a sewer system, but the construction cost was too expensive. Instead, in 1927 The Home Ministry-style improved toilet, which promised safe treatment of excreta, was introduced. In 1937 jurisdiction over toilets was transferred to the Ministry of Health and Welfare and it produced a slightly improved version, changing the name of the toilet to ‘Ministry of Health and Welfare-style improved toilet’ (Japan Toilet Association 2015). Earlier proposals and settling for toilets with primitive versions of septic tanks suggest that the push for sewer construction was motivated by the need to show the country as a modernized nation rather than fear of pathogenic properties of excrement.

(3) Standardization of bourgeois fecal habitus

Finally, Inglis (2001) inspired by Bourdieu and Elias explains the habits and attitudes toward excreta in the West in terms of the development and operation of the bourgeois fecal habitus. The first clash with Douglasian theory lies in the theoretical framework Inglis applied – he generalizes about the whole of Western culture, but for Douglas such an approach would make no sense as there is no cosmological cohesion in it.¹ Second, Inglis argues

¹ As mentioned at the beginning of this essay, at first glance my analysis shares a similar flaw, but the reason for it has already been explained.

that the present image of excreta in Western culture diffused from bourgeois ideas because the materially dominant class in society is always the symbolically dominant class. He sees the standardization of the bourgeois fecal habitus as manifestation of its power, while for Douglas dirt is definitely associated with power and a system, but in her terms spiritual powers and symbolic meanings precede the system – “they express it and provide institutions for manipulating it” (Douglas 2003: 114; O'Brien 2008: 140). Although Inglis links modern excretory customs with bourgeois dominance, he admits that purely ideological roots are not enough to explain the phenomena. He adds they stem from socio-cultural factors and developments in the medical and natural sciences, which had set the background for the diffusion of the bourgeois fecal habitus.

Borrowing Inglis's term, let us consider the fecal habitus of the dominant Japanese classes. The first variation in toiletry habits of the Japanese court took place in the Heian period (794-1185). The aristocracy started to use chamber pots, a new fashion that came from China in 700. While the aristocracy moved toward refining their excretory habits, the lower classes continued to defecate in the streets.

As mentioned before, Japanese agriculture strongly relied on night soil and by the 18th century night soil became an economic good. The high value of excreta created a night soil ranking based on the quality of human waste – the wealthier the household was, the higher the price owner could get. The reason lies in the diet in the households: wealthier ones could afford a better diet, thus night soil collected from them served as a better fertilizer (Yamaji 1994). Therefore it is no wonder that on top of the ranking was waste from the Edo castle. The status of the elite's waste was definitely higher than that of commoners', but what about the excretory etiquette?

The shogun's wife (*midaidokoro*) had her private toilet called *man'nen*, literally ten thousand years. It was a hole so deep it would not fill up even after ten years and when the shogun's wife died it would be buried. In case the shogun remarried, a new hole would be dug for the new lady (Japan Toilet Association 2015). Other women from the shogun's family had their maids wipe them clean after defecation. It was a privilege of women of the highest status such as the shogun's wife, daughter or mother, but it was a common practice. Maids accompanied the lady to the toilet to help with her layered clothing, but they also examined the lady's feces to check her health condition (Katō 2003).

Moreover, there are records of women from the upper class using a noise reducing pot (*otokeshi no tsubo*) outside. When a lady felt the need, her maid would remove a plug from the pot so the water would start to flow masking the associated noise (Yamaji 1994).

Common people, however, defecated into “normal” toilets without any refined etiquette, thus we cannot talk about standardization of the dominant class's fecal habitus in Japan. One might think that the noise reducing pot is the genesis of the sound princess (*oto hime*), a device present in many female toilets in Japan, that imitates the sound of flowing water to cover the sound of bodily functions. Indeed, both devices follow the same logic, but the sound princess is not a straightforward successor of the noise reducing pot – the latter one was invented in 1988 to stop women from consciously flushing water while using the toilet to mask the sound (Hayashi 2011). Furthermore, it is true that women from upper class were conscious of sounds that accompanied relieving themselves, but ordinary people had little if any reluctance toward urinating in public. The impression made by Kyoto women who urinated standing up resulted in many poems and mentions in literature, while the practice continued until the 1970s in the countryside (Sutō 1988).

Of course, in present day Japan we can assume that excretory customs are more or less the same: the public sewerage system covers 77.6% of population (Japan Sewage Works Association 2015), access to improved sanitation is universal and as of 2015 77.5% of homes in Japan have high-tech bidet toilet (Cabinet Office of the Government of Japan 2015). But the standardization of toilets was not a result of the diffusion of bourgeois fecal habitus, but rather a consequence of adjusting to the Western standards in the postwar period: Western-style toilets spread through the country when they became the standard type in condominiums from 1958 on (Japan Toilet Association 2015).

4. Non-Western cosmologies as a “matter out of place”?

In this essay I have analyzed the notions of human waste in the Christian tradition and Japan through the lens of the most prominent theories in the emerging sociology of waste. As each of these theories was inspired by Douglasian

“matter out of place”, following Douglas I first turned to religion – Christianity in Europe and the two main religions of Japan, Shintoism and Buddhism – to characterize the portrayal of excreta in Christian Europe and Japan with the assumption that they reflect respective cosmologies. Then I moved to analyzing sociological theories of waste, which state that the genesis of modern attitudes toward excreta lies in either death, pathogenicity or the standardization of bourgeois fecal habitus. These theories rely exclusively on Western examples, thus it is not surprising that human waste in Christian Europe fits into the overall framework. But applying the theories to Japan showed how their explanatory power is context dependent. In conclusion, none of the theories could be validated in Japan realm, which signalizes their universality should be reconsidered.

Two findings come from this: first, although many scholars feel the need to modify Douglas’s original theory of dirt as a “matter out of place”, her original formulation proves to be the most robust and useful of all of them. That does not mean that dirt as reminder of death, its pathogenicity or bourgeois fecal habitus make no sense. Every study criticized in this essay is well researched and insightful, but I suggest that we need to look at these theories as succeeding developments that build upon the original cosmological order, as Douglas suggested.

Analyzing human waste in Christian Europe and Japan we can see that in the old continent excreta have mostly been nothing more than dirt, and thus they were condemned, while in Japan they were reused as night soil and treated at least neutrally. Although I am not a fecal medical specialist, I doubt that differences between European and Japanese excreta are so substantial, as to preclude the use of either as fertilizer. But, even though night soil was used in Europe, it never became as popular nor commodified as it was in Japan and its use was seen as a necessary evil. I suggest the reason behind this lies precisely in each culture’s distinctive cosmology: deep-rooted condemnation of excreta in the Christian tradition resulted in aversion to night soil, therefore its use was never standardized. On the other hand, Japanese tradition of positive appreciation of excreta enabled the country to use night soil to its full potential. Of course, modern attitudes toward human and other waste cannot be straightforwardly traced back to primitive symbolism, and industrialization and medical progress have played great roles in their construction. Nevertheless, as this essay shows, it is important to understand that with the progress of medicine and technology, the original negative understanding of excreta was only justified in the Christian Europe. In Japan, on the other hand, medical knowledge surely influenced the understanding of excrement, but I argue that it was not until the postwar period, when the Allies and their social mores influenced the present Japanese fecal habitus, that it ultimately gained negative connotations. In conclusion, sociology of waste should first consider primitive cosmological systems before moving on to further theorizing, exactly as Douglas argued.

Second, this essay reiterates how Western-oriented major sociological theories are. Douglas’s idealistic approach was a call to concentrate on culture’s distinctive cosmologies and move to liberate anthropology from the ubiquitous West and constant intrusion of Western values. A sociology of waste that draws on Douglas’s dirt as a “matter out of place”, but modifies the theory along the way to fit the Western context is exactly what Douglas wanted to avoid. In order to create a comprehensive framework, instead of documenting a case, it is necessary to draw upon and analyze multiple diverse examples. In this essay I have revealed clear inconsistencies only by introducing the Japan realm – what other findings might come from adding a different Asian, African or South American country for further comparison? Although Douglas’s *Purity and Danger* is by no means flawless, her theory proves to be the only one of the reviewed ones here that prompts us to give consideration to various, non-Western cosmologies. Thus, this essay highlights necessary improvements in the emerging sociology of waste and suggests that stopping treating non-Western cosmologies as a “matter out of place” might be a good first step.

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