ESSAY

Public Sociology and Anthropology:
Moving Toward Things That Smell

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While visiting relatives this past Christmas, most of our family—my spouse Joan, daughter Rose, and son Alec—took a train from Hammond, Indiana into Chicago. After an enjoyable day walking around Millennium Park, we headed back to the station to wait for the late afternoon train that would transport us back. The area leading to our boarding queue contained a number of coffee shops, small retail outlets, and some food court seating. After one disheveled man trudged by us, Alec, then 17, remarked, "That guy's cologne sure is strong. He should dial it back a bit." After a second or two it dawned on me that what our son was smelling was not cologne, but rather the unmistakable scent of stale urine and body odor wafting off a homeless man. At first this struck Joan and me as funny, but then it occurred to us that our son did not recognize the distinctive smell of urine infused with the dank odor of poverty. What does it mean when a young man with a sociologist father and guidance counselor mother fails to recognize the odors of homelessness? Perhaps we've been too entrenched in private Christian schools with their upward mobility and parking lots filled with late model SUV's. Perhaps we've been living in a community fitted with olfactory gates. And, perhaps what Jesus calls us to do is to move toward, and deeply inhale, the odors that, to us, have an objectionable smell.

Our train station experience took place on a Saturday. The following day, the pre-Christmas sermon at my in-laws' church, which was part of their series on "Senses of Christmas," addressed smell. The minister speculated about the various scents present at the birth of Christ, exploring how our romanticized view of the manger scene leaves out a few smells like manure and various other odors found on farms and lingering on weary travelers with only one set of clothes. Undoubtedly, the birth of Christ was not accented by the scents of cloves, cinnamon, and "chestnuts roasting on an open fire" we identify with Christmas. What sort of smells would emanate from shepherds keeping watch over their flocks by night? The

minister helpfully offered several observations I'd not previously considered. Do we turn up our noses at the smells found in a barn or a manger? Jesus, the King of Kings, was born into the smells we wrinkle our noses at—"our" smells. If I'm remembering correctly, he remarked that Jesus—from incarnation through to his death—received the full stench of our humanity. Counter-intuitively, as is often the case in scripture, there's "good news" in the "bad smells" of the first Christmas. The Word "made flesh" at Jesus' birth has olfactory overtones—flesh smells.

My sociological imagination was kindled. Sociologists and anthropologists, with their interest in stratification and revealing and addressing injustice, function as contemporary prophets who hunt for things that smell, and who envision and work toward a world that smells a lot better than the one we presently inhabit, where the smells of people in different strata mix together, where the one with many changes of clothes gives to the one with only one set. Poverty smells bad. Injustice smells bad. Racism smells bad. Gender-based oppression smells bad. Greed smells bad. And so on. In what follows, I invite you to kindle your socio-anthropological imaginations and join me in considering a few things that have a certain smell about them.

Things that Smell Bad

Nursing homes frequently have a faintly unpleasant smell about them. I have long marveled at my oldest daughter's ability to run through a nursing home when she was a child of 8 or 9, touching people, getting drooled on, and neither noticing nor caring about the faint yet distinctive smell of urine that hung about. Though I have spent little time in them, I imagine prisons have similar odors that many would find objectionable. The smells of nursing homes and prisons are "away" from most of our day-to-day lives. Escaping the smell is part of the pressure we feel to leave such places.

"Bad" smells accompany myriad forms of human dysfunction. Alcoholism has a smell about it. Understaffed and underfunded orphanages have a smell that lingers about them. Homelessness has an unpleasant smell. Even familiar colloquialisms—"That _____ really stinks"— compare things we find objectionable to olfactory offense.

Several years ago, our host for the CSA conference at Eastern University in Philadelphia arranged for us to visit the "Lest We Forget" Slavery Museum,[1] which has left an indelible imprint on me. The elderly Black couple who both owned the museum and guided us through it, spoke of how traffickers packed their human cargo into the holds of ships for their six-week journeys, shackling them to one another, at first positioning them on their backs, and then later, seated, when they learned that such an arrangement would produce lower mortality rates. During their terrible journey, they lay in their own excrement and vomit, and if someone

[1] https://lwfsm.com/

died, they would simply be shackled to a dead person for the remainder of the trip. The stench must have been unbearable, especially for those who could not escape it.

During graduate school I authored a paper on "Mother Teresa as a Charismatic Leader." I came away from my study with profound respect for this diminutive woman who consistently moved toward things that smell. I read accounts of Saint Teresa cleaning maggots from the wounds of the lowest caste people. She touched the desperately poor, and undoubtedly had their smell indelibly marked on her person. I imagine that Jesus had a similar smell about his person. After all, he hung about with people who smelled bad.

In "The Conceptual Practices of Power: A Feminist Sociology of Knowledge," standpoint sociologist Dorothy Smith examines how the social location of women puts them at significant disadvantage as scientists in an androcentric world. Under the sub-heading "Women Sociologists and the Contradiction between Sociology and Experience," she writes about the bifurcation of [women's] consciousness:

> … experienced as women move between these two modes [professional/managerial settings and domestic/home settings] with a working consciousness active in both. …Thus, the relationship between ourselves as practicing sociologists and ourselves as working women is always there for us as a practical matter, an ordinary, unremarked, yet pervasive aspect of our experience of the world. The bifurcation of consciousness becomes for us a daily chasm to be crossed, on the one side of which is this special conceptual activity of thought, research, teaching, and administration, and on the other the world of localized activities oriented toward particular others, keeping things clean, managing somehow the house and household and the children—a world in which the particularities of persons in their full organic immediacy (feeding, cleaning up the vomit, changing the diapers) are inescapable. Even if this isn't something that currently preoccupies us, as it no longer preoccupies me, our present is given shape by a past that was thus. (Farganis 2004:375)

In other words, in an androcentric society, women tend to live where things smell, and their present activity in the world is moderated by their past immersion in objectionable smells, or the expectation that they belong with the aforementioned smells. Women must traverse the chasm from the land of things that smell to a subordinated position in the hierarchy of the land of things that don't. And it is women's immersion in the places that stink—the smells of home and childcare—that makes possible the more unified and far less fragmented experiences that men enjoy in their workplaces and the public sphere in general.

Dead bodies smell bad. Perhaps we lose something with our Western practice of quickly removing the deceased from their families, of rationalizing and sanitizing the smell and presence of death. Perhaps we would gain something from inhaling the smell of death more deeply. Jesus wasn't deterred by the women's warning that, should he enter Lazarus' tomb, the

dead Lazarus would smell bad (John 11). Rather, Jesus moved resolutely toward, and into, the stench, whereupon something remarkable took place.

Wealthy countries frequently export their objectionable smells to poorer countries or to their own landfills. The US exported 920 million pounds of scrap plastic in 2023 (Alves 2024) and puts 140 million tons of waste into landfills annually (McDonald 2023). Landfills are located away from most middle-class residences, but if you visit the dump, you'll see that plenty of people live on its borders. Like the toxic stench of landfills, war also smells bad. The gaseous smells of war—mustard, chlorine, and phosgene—can maim and kill.

When I was a graduate student, I attended a lecture on "Dust" given by symbolic interactionist Gary Alan Fine. The abstract of Fine's article, "Dust: A Study in Sociological Miniaturism," states, "Dust, by virtue of its 'smallness,' provides a window through which we can explore social structural issues using microsociological analysis. Specifically, we examine how dust and techniques for its control are linked to issues of gender, work, political economy, and nation" (Fine and Hallett 2003:1). In his lecture, Fine commented on how we are stratified by our proximity to dust, and explained how the wealthy export their dust (garbage, toxic materials, etc.) to poorer neighborhoods. Dust and bad smells are of a piece, I believe.

Things that Smell Good

When we think of good smells, we imagine things like freshly baked bread. Particular good smells can evoke fond memories. Babies heads have a pleasant smell about them. Perhaps you've known a child who didn't want his or her "blankey" washed, because they didn't want the comforting smell of it to be erased. Horses smell good. So do dogs—for those who like dogs! As mentioned earlier, we've come to associate Christmas with good smells. Jesus' feet probably smelled better than those of his contemporaries after Mary Magdalene poured expensive perfume on them, as detailed in John 12 and Mark 14. And, Revelation 19 offers images of the "wedding feast of the lamb," a feast to which all are invited, especially the least of these, the ones at the bottom of the stratified order of dust and human smells. Feasting is celebration amidst good smells. Most of us can identify smells we find particularly alluring.

Analysis: The Smells of Human Dignity

What I have been calling "smells" are closely aligned with the spectrum of human dignity. Bad smells are associated with social dysfunction and disintegration, while good ones underscore order and functionality. The hospitality required of God's people in both Old and New Testaments necessarily involves inviting in those who, to us, smell bad, or just different. My departmental colleague Dr. Chris Robinson operates a year-round ministry called Project-52. He raises money and organizes various youth groups, college groups, and others to clean up garbage from the yards of the poor and destitute. In 2023, using 456 volunteers, they moved

more than 105 tons of garbage into dumpsters and away from people's houses, helping them avoid eviction due to noncompliance with community standard codes. They remove dangerous and objectionable smells from people's lives so that they can maintain a dignified presence in their neighborhoods. Robinson has an unusual approach to ministry in that he does his best to prevent volunteers from ever meeting the people they serve—thus preserving the dignity of those living amidst mold, stench, and debris.

Oddly, a "good smelling church" devoid of bad smells is a dysfunctional church. Robinson relayed an experience where a homeless man wandered into a church he was attending and at the end of the service was left to wander back into the smells from whence he came. I am guilty of such dereliction of Christian duty. I am certain I turn up my nose at others from time to time. Perhaps you do as well. I have failed many times to push further into and inhale deeply the things that smell, in the tradition of Mother Teresa.

Professor Camille Hallstrom, one of my colleagues who teaches art and drama, displayed a Thomas Kinkade painting as part of a lecture she was giving, and critiqued it as a world without sin—or, for our purposes here, one without bad smells. An AI overview of his artwork reads: "Thomas Kinkade's paintings are characterized by their luminous, idyllic scenes, often featuring cottages gardens, and churches, bathed in a warm, ethereal light and pastel colors, aiming to evoke a sense of peace and inspiration." A world so described is an illusion—one where homeless people do not wander into church, where nursing homes smell good (if they exist at all), and where Jesus was born into the pleasant aroma of cinnamon and cloves. That is not our world, and it is not the world to which we are called. Confessing sin is revealing one's own smells, in effect joining with those whose smells render them undignified and vulnerable. To what lengths do we go in concealing our bad smells?

Economic systems both create and hide smells. In her introductory sociology textbook, *Terrible, Magnificent Sociology*," Lisa Wade discusses environmental racism. She writes,

> Poor and minority families are more likely to live near industrial mining and agriculture; toxic waste and garbage dumps; power plants; and air, sea, and river ports. These industrial processes make the air, soil, and water more dangerous. As a result of this exposure, people of color are more likely than others to give birth to premature babies and develop asthma, lead poisoning, diabetes, cancer, heart disease, and other debilitating and chronic diseases. (2022:212)

Bad smells are not benign, and they disproportionately negatively impact the less powerful, more vulnerable members of a society.

Finally, "smell" as I've been discussing it, can be pondered in purely sensory "olfactory" ways, but also, and perhaps more importantly, in ideological ways. Around whom do we hold our noses? Who is not welcome in our gated communities, condos, pickleball tournaments,

schools, churches, or Christian colleges? To whom do we fail to show hospitality, or whom do we even actively block from our fellowship? Quite a while ago, our elderly White Georgia neighbors recalled that when they were younger, the Southern town in which they lived filled in its public pool with concrete because they couldn't seem to keep Black from swimming in it.[2] This seemed a reasonable course of action to them. The ideological smell of racism. Very ugly.

Soap and cleanliness have been employed as metaphors for colonialization. The "civilizing" process includes brightening, whitening, and eradicating the smells of Indigenous peoples and other racial minorities. In a compelling blog post, Lisa Wade (2010) examines vintage ads for Pears soap and Ivory soap. The text of one Pears ad reads:

> The first step towards lightening the White Man's Burden is through teaching the virtues of cleanliness. Pear's Soap is a potent factor in brightening the dark corners of the earth as civilization advances, while amongst the cultured of all nations it holds the highest place—it is the ideal toilet soap.

Likewise, an early ad for Ivory Soap, entitled "A New Departure," reads:

> Said Uncle Sam: "I will be wise,
> and thus the Indian civilize:
> Instead of guns that kill a mile,
> Tobacco, lead, and liquor vile,
> Instead of serving out a meal,
> Or sending Agents out to steal,
> I'll give domestic arts to teach,
> A cake of IVORY SOAP to each.
>
> Before it flies the guilty stain,
> The grease and dirt no more remain;
> 'Twill change their nature day by day,
> And wash their darkest blots away.
> They'll turn their bows to fishing-rods,
> And bury hatchets under sods,
> In wisdom and in worth increase,
> And ever smoke the pipe of peace;
> For ignorance can never cope
> With such a foe as IVORY SOAP.

[2] For an excellent pictorial essay on public swimming pools and racism, see Williams, Danielle. 2024. "Third Places We Lost Due to Racism: Public Pools. *Melanin Base Camp*. Accessed March 19, 2024 (https://www.melaninbasecamp.com/trip-reports/2024/2/26/third-places-that-disappeared-due-to-racism-public-pools).

In the same post Wade (2010) analyzes a "political cartoon, circa 1886, that uses the metaphor of washing to describe the cleansing of the Chinese from the U.S. At the bottom it reads, 'The Chinese must go.'"

At the end of her post, Wade directs the reader to vintage ads selling soap with depictions of African Americans as dirty. These ads reveal more about their authors and sponsors than about the people they depict. They reveal the deep insecurities and identity anxieties that produce such pathological downward comparison and disdain for those relegated to out-group status. It's no surprise that the worldwide deodorant industry is projected to generate $27.8 billion U.S. dollars in 2025 (Statista 2025). Deodorant is the perfume of identity crisis. Deodorants are, arguably, one way we distance ourselves from our own humanity, disguising the scent of our humanness, and helping maintain the illusion that we smell better—in both olfactory and ideological ways—than our neighbors.

Identifying with Jesus necessitates that we enter the lives of those who, to us, smell bad. Arguably, the hungry, thirsty, naked, stranger, sick, or imprisoned for whom Jesus advocated (Matthew 25:35-46) all emanated a smell that repelled those with greater agency who might otherwise have helped them. But Jesus stands with the ones who smell. And he asks that we do the same. In the final analysis, the smells of "their" humanity are not all that different from ours. Jesus absorbs their smells, and yours and mine as well. Welcome to the New Jerusalem; breathe deeply. It smells like neighbors.

As the people of God "for the world," we would do well to remember that barring from fellowship or otherwise controlling those with a different smell than ours—olfactory or ideological—manifests as stench before God, and therefore raises questions about our commitment to the ways of Jesus.

To conclude, I think that we sociologists and anthropologists, though we fail and are guilty of the very things we labor to address, are some who actively seek out a variety of smells, move toward and into them, try to understand them, and hope to diffuse them in shared spaces. May we live together, smell a lot more alike, and over time manifest the redolence of hospitality, care, welcome, and neighborliness, that aroma which wafts upward and pleases the

nostrils of God—"a fragrant offering, a sacrifice acceptable and pleasing to God" (Philippians 4:18).

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