

Book reviews for Volume 8, Issue 1 of Human Figurations

Volume 8, Issue 1: *The Sociology of Sociology in Long-Term Perspective*, 2019

Permalink: <http://hdl.handle.net/2027/spo.11217607.0008.108> [<http://hdl.handle.net/2027/spo.11217607.0008.108>]

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Le social à l'épreuve du dégoût

Dominique Memmi, Gilles Raveneau and Emmanuel Taïeb (eds.),

Rennes: Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2016, €19 pbk, ISBN : 9782753550896.

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As a sequel to their article ‘Anatomy of disgust’ (*L'Anatomie du dégoût*), published in 2011 in *Ethnologie française* (the Journal of French Ethnology) (Dominique Memmi, Gilles Raveneau and Emmanuel Taïeb edited a second opus centred on the topic of disgust, inspired in part by the work of Norbert Elias. If this new opus stresses how significant the wider topic of emotions has been within Anglo-Saxon and European social science for the past twenty years, the editors of this book nevertheless advocate the provision of a stronger foundation for the sociology of emotions, built on a substantial effort in setting up definitions and outlining the problems at stake. Hence their choice of centring their study on one single affect (namely disgust), one single space (the workspace of health-care and funerary professionals), and one single moment in time (the twentieth century, to avoid any anachronistic bias). Firmly inspired by Elias, they also set forth their intention to connect the dots between this affect's expressions, their historical occurrence and the social configurations in which they arise.

A ‘handsome’ sociological object

To say that disgust is a ‘handsome’ sociological object underlines at once how intellectually bracing a concept it can be, as well as how unavoidable it is in the field of the *socius*. It is an affect that everyone experiences (or has experienced), but at the same time it can be said that disgust is more than often ‘unthought’ or ‘unspoken’. It is a ‘politically incorrect’ affect, the displays of which are often hidden as a potential menace to social issues, as the book's title aptly suggests: ‘Society as challenged by disgust’. To publicly state one's disgust is a transgressive behaviour, which is why this affect, in the majority of cases, is outcast to the *backstage regions of social life* (Elias 1973 [1939]). At the same time, disgust is to be found everywhere in social relationships and its being so highly structural, transversal and trans-historical is what makes it such a motivating object – which the present book and the contributions it features underline very clearly.

A clinician's approach

The first aspect that needs to be underlined is epistemological. The contributions featured in the book appear to be heterogeneous, which stems from the contributors' diverse statuses (scholars as well as professionals), but also from the fact that some contributions are more orientated towards the theorisation of 'disgust' as a sociological object, whereas others are more orientated towards its description. Overall, however, these contributions all fit within a sociology that can be termed *comprehensive* (in Weberian terms), namely a sociology that truly stretches to reach the *meaning that subjects give to their behaviour*, both individually and collectively; those contributions also situate themselves in an ethnographic effort, wary of accurately describing situations and firmly framing the analysis within an empirical setting. The underlying approach that unites them could also be qualified as a 'clinician's approach', insofar as the authors are especially mindful of the emotional dimension that structures social relationships and, within those social relationships, workplace relationships. The authors underline in their conclusions how important it is to outline a *history of sensorialities*, and the clinician's and ethnographic approaches developed in the book aptly fit in what we would rather term a 'sociology of affects'.

In his book *La gestion des passions politiques*, on ('The handling of political passions'), Pierre Ansart (1983) is to be credited for reminding us of the stakes of analysing the passions and collective feelings that frame what he calls the *socio-emotional structure* of societies. In particular, in his book *Les cliniciens des passions politiques* ('The clinicians of political passions'), he shows that the emotional dimension has always been at the heart of the great sociological thinkers' reflections (Ansart 1997). He himself seeks to grasp it in the political field, but it is obvious in the various contributions featured in the present book that this dimension is also prevalent in organisations, and the clinician's approach favoured by the contributors underlines that disgust is indiscriminately a social, historical and cultural construct.

The historicisation of this affect, as advocated by Christian Chevandier in particular in his contribution entitled 'We're yucky ... you must see that! – For a history of disgust in the workplace' (« *On est dégueulasse ... faut l'voir !* » *Pour une histoire du dégoût au travail*), reveals how much emotional motivations owe to the social configurations that mould them. It thus appears fully justified to resort to Elias's work in order to consider disgust, which the coordinators of the book strongly advise.

The patronage of Eliasian thought

It is meaningful to muster the Eliasian mental framework, first and foremost from the civilising process theory's viewpoint, even though the word 'civilisation' as established by Elias always requires, in our view, to be used with the utmost caution, given its irrevocably normative dimension (Delzescaux 2016).

But if one sticks to the technical usage that Elias strives to establish, which refers to the process of moulding the apparatus of self-constraint, it becomes obvious in the various contributions that this apparatus plays a key part in the process of restraining disgust: it is true of firemen as seen by Romain Pudal in his contribution entitled 'Are Firemen the dustmen of society?' (*Les pompiers, éboueurs de la société ?*). It is also true of social workers, as discussed by Jean Constance in his contribution on 'Social workers and poor bodies' (*Travailleurs sociaux et corps pauvres*), and it is again true of caregivers through the strategies they display when washing people, in order to keep a distance with what the book's editors name *dysphoric* bodies, namely *ailing* and/or *stigmatised* bodies, as Fanny Dubois and Guy Lebeer put it in their contribution on 'The geriatric caregiver, or when disgust cannot be overlooked' (*Aide-soignante en gériatrie : ou quand le dégoût devient incontournable*, p 20). The imperative of self-control then strongly increases in intensity and, according to Freudian terminology, one may say that the collective superego that builds up leads to forbidding even the very emotion of disgust: at least when dealing with mixed interactions – as Goffman put it – which combine insiders and laypersons (Goffman 1975 [1963];). Ways in which affects deemed to be socially shameful are

expressed remain compartmentalised in some way (de Swaan 2015, 2016), which is clearly demonstrated in Marine Jeanne Boisson's contribution, entitled 'When death contaminates offices: the administration of death' (*Quand la mort contamine les bureaux : l'administration des décès*). Social grouping is required if one is to dare to express disgust. For instance, this is verified in the field of multiple disability, which I am specifically exploring within the context of my own research (see e.g. Blondel and Delzescaux 2018). These patients stun caregivers with respect to their often being deformed, drooling, and because of their overall lack of communication, apart from screaming. But they also stun caregivers with respect to the sheer intensity of the negative affects that stem from interacting with that kind of patient. Professionals are somewhat ashamed of their own disgust that they regard as unfair towards the multiple disability patient, and humour, as harsh as it may be, appears to be a way of coping with such feelings that are so unbearable to the superego.

Considering disgust from the standpoint of the sociology of distinction

The other meaningful contact point with Elias's sociology pertains to the sociology of distinction that he unfolds in his research and that is, in our view, absolutely crucial. Through various contributions, such as Clémence Jullien's on 'Quite embarrassing parturients: challenging India's medical hierarchy' (*Des parturientes bien embarrassantes : la hiérarchie médicale indienne à l'épreuve*), Romain Pudal's (op. cit.) or Thomas Bonnet's on 'The police request: the climax of the undertaker's dirty job' (*La réquisition de police : l'acmé du sale boulot dans les pompes funèbres*), it appears that the challenges that disgust poses as a sociological object may also be outlined from the standpoint of the sociology of distinction, and that the framework of 'the established' versus 'the outsiders' that Elias and Scotson (1965) expose in *The Established and the Outsiders* enables the connection of the the topic of disgust to that of power and its social distribution, and also to the idealising processes of the *I* and the *We*, the latter topic being consistently coupled in Elias's thinking with the question of social habitus.

Dealing with dead, old or deformed bodies produces, depending on socio-historical context and setting, as much *group charisma* as *group disgrace* (Elias and Scotson 1965; Elias 1994). The set of issues pertaining to 'dirty work', recurrent in the book's contributions, illustrates that contention quite well. 'Dirty work' can spawn as much stigma as value – Everett Hughes (1996) himself would insist on that idea. Approaching the objects of disgust can thus produce social value. The interviews I, along with two colleagues, had the chance to carry out with home carers catering for elderly and handicapped persons' needs (Blondel, Delzescaux and Fermon 2013) demonstrated that successfully persuading elderly people to accept a wash, and carrying it out in a state-of-the-art fashion enables carers not only to make *visible* the quality of their work (the person then being clean, well dressed, with proper make-up), but also its objective social relevance, both individual and collective. Thus, a porosity of boundaries here exists between the honourable and the shameful.

In the end, disgust appears to be a consistent and transdisciplinary object of social-scientific inquiry. Some leads are here thoroughly explored: social distancing, symbolic contagion, the hygienisation of social space. However, some others are only mentioned in passing and would benefit from further research: the modes of socialisation applied to the objects of disgust, as well as the conversion of the *dirty work* into a *rewarding job*. By all accounts, the field of studies which this book opens up in favour of the auscultation of social space proves here to be full of promises.

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Online ISSN: 2166-6644