A sociology of smell

ANTHONY SYNNOTT *Concordia University**

Rares sont les sociologues qui ont étudié les sens. Or, de tous les sens, c'est l'odorat qui a toujours été et demeure sans doute encore le moins valorisé. Dans cette communication, l'auteur examine quelques-uns des rôles de l'odorat dans les interactions sociales, notamment l'importance de l'odorat dans la construction morale du soi et de l'autre dans le cadre des relations entre personnes de classe différente, d'origine ethnique différente et de sexe différent. Les équations fondamentales, symboliques plutôt que chimiques, sont les suivantes: celui ou ce qui sent bon est bon et vice versa; et celui ou ce qui est mauvais sent mauvais et vice versa. Dans les relations entre groupes, ces équations servent, d'une part, à légitimer les différences de pouvoir et, d'autre part, à les contester d'une manière fort intime.

Sociologists have rarely researched the senses; and of all the senses, smell has been, and probably still is, the least valued. In this paper we consider some of the roles of smell in social interaction, particularly the significance of smell in the moral construction of the self and the other, in terms of class, ethnic and gender relations. The fundamental equations, symbolic rather than chemical, are that who or what smells good is good, and vice versa; and who or what is bad or evil smells bad, and vice versa. Such equations are utilized in intergroup relations to legitimate power differentials, and also to challenge them, in a most intimate way.

We are all constantly emitting and perceiving odours, smelling and being smelled; and these odours play important roles in virtually every area of social interaction: eating and drinking, health, the home, therapy, stress reduction, religion, industry, transport, class and ethnic relations and personal care. Odours are everywhere, and performing a wide variety of

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functions.

Odours are also big business. The fragrance industry is valued at $2.25 billion in the United States alone (Strong and Poor, 1990: H39); but the fragrance industry itself is only about 20 per cent of the total aroma/olfaction industry, which includes detergents, air fresheners, polishes, the food industry and so on (Ackerman, 1990: 39). The total olfaction industry is therefore worth well over $10 billion.

What do these odours mean? And how are these meanings constructed? Are any meanings universal? Or are they all relative? How do odours affect social interaction? How do these odours throw light, so to speak, on our own culture?

We must first of all distinguish between different kinds of odours: natural (e.g., body odours), manufactured (e.g., perfumes, pollution), and symbolic (e.g., olfactory metaphors). These three kinds of odours are not completely separate; indeed in any given social situation, all three may well be present, mingled together. They are conceptually separate, however, and it is with *symbolic* odour that we shall be principally concerned.

Olfaction is a particularly critical area of research, not only because of its ubiquity nor even for its economics, but for a number of other reasons also, which largely explain its powerful social and economic significance. 1/ Olfaction is so often 'overlooked,' a phrase which describes the hegemony of sight, and which is part of the problem of olfaction; 2/ it is often subliminal or, in Tom Robbins' (1984) word, 'magical'; 3/ it is highly personal: an olfactory 'consumption' of the other; 4/ it is physiologically direct; 5/ it triggers memories; 6/ and also emotions; 7/ and modifies behaviour; but 8/ and this is my point, olfaction is also a moral construction of reality.

Sociologists have rarely researched the senses: Simmel (1908/1921) was and is an exception; and smell has been especially neglected. Indeed the only general article is Largey and Watson's excellent piece, 'The Sociology of Odors' (1972). Anthropology is further advanced in the study of the senses, as David Howes' *The Varieties of Sensory Experience* (1991) indicates; but even in anthropology olfaction is relatively neglected. Yet the subject is of immense social significance. Odour is many things: a boundary-marker, a status symbol, a distance-maintainer, an impression management technique, a schoolboy's joke or protest, and a danger-signal – but it is above all a statement of who one is. Odours define the individual and the group, as do sight, sound and the other senses; and smell, like them, mediates social interaction.

In this paper I will consider first the low status of smell in the sensory hierarchy; this may in part explain the relative absence of sociological research on smell. I suggest, however, that this low status us not 'deserved' and that, as sociologists, we should attend more sensibly to our senses. Then we examine the role of odour in the moral construction of the individual and of various groups: class, race, and gender. We conclude with a discussion on some of the practical and theoretical implications of olfaction.

THE FALLEN ANGEL AND THE POTENT WIZARD

Smell is the least valued, and least researched, of all the senses. 'If you had to lose one of your five senses,' I asked some of my students, 'which would you choose to lose?' Most of them, 78 per cent (sample size 49), replied the sense of smell, followed by the sense of taste. Why? For many reasons. Some answered that smell was relatively unimportant and useless to them – except to inform them that the toast was burning. Others said they had a poor sense of smell anyway, due to allergies, colds, sinus problems and so on, so they would not be missing much. Some replied that much of what they smelled was so unpleasant that they could do without it. And others said that if they could not smell, they would not be able to taste so well, so they would not eat so much, so they could maintain their desired weights and figures! (But these respondents should logically have deprecated taste more than smell, although smell determines most of taste.) For many reasons, therefore, olfaction seems to be the most despised sense.

Another indication of the low status of smell is the lack of a specialized vocabulary of olfaction. Things may be described as smelling nice or nasty or neutral, but this only describes personal reactions to these odours. Odours are often defined in terms of other senses, sour or sweet (taste), strong or weak (touch); or even in their own terms: coffee smells like coffee, and geraniums smell like ... Without an independent vocabulary, it is hard to discuss the topic. Similarly there are books, courses and television programs on musical appreciation, appreciation of the visual arts and taste or gastronomy and wine culture; but there is no equivalent in odour appreciation.

Futhermore there is not even a scientific classification system for the sense of smell as there is for the other senses. There are four basic tastes: sweet, sour, salt and bitter, which are appreciated by different receptor sites on the tongue. Sight is determined by light, which exhibits the particle-like properties of photons, and wavelength variations along the electromagnetic spectrum. Sound is determined by vibrations, travelling at about 760 m.p.h.; and touch is determined by temperature, pressure, pain thresholds, galvanic skin responses and other variables. But there is no agreement about olfaction. Linnaeus suggested seven types of smell: aromatic, fragrant, ambrosiac, alliaceous, hircine, foul, and nauseous; but the distinctions are not clear. Does a rose smell aromatic or fragrant? And what smells foul to one person, or to members of one culture, may smell fragrant to another. Modern scientists have estimated from four to nine classes or types of smell, excluding subcategories; and there is no consensus (Smith, 1989: 106–7; Bedichek, 1960: 15–26).

Smell, and taste also, receive very little attention in contemporary physiology and psychology texts. They are described as the chemical as opposed to the proprioceptive senses; also as the lower (formerly, animal) senses as opposed to the higher or intellectual senses.

This tradition of the disparagement of smell is ancient. Aristotle developed a clear hierarchy of the sensorium. At the top were the human

senses of sight and hearing, whose special contributions to humanity were beauty and music, and both could lead to God; at the bottom were the animal senses of taste and touch, which alone could be abused, by gluttony and lust respectively, and which did not lead to God. In between was smell: it could not be abused, in Aristotle's view, but then, nor could it lead to God; nonetheless, he classified it as a human sense, but the lowest one.[1] Aquinas followed Aristotle closely. Kant did not even discuss the sense of smell in his aesthetics. Basically, there *is* no aesthetics of smell in the western tradition. Textbooks on aesthetics usually discuss visual beauty and the aural beauty of music, and perhaps taste, and perhaps the tactile textures of skin, marble or fabric. But not smell.

One exception is Hegel, who did discuss the nose and smell in his *Aesthetics* (1975: 728–37), but he regarded smell as the lowest in the hierarchy of the four human senses. He did not discuss touch. Freud was in line with this tradition in his suggestion that smell was the characteristic *animal* sense, and sight the dominant *human* sense: the development of erect human posture resulted in the replacement of the nose by the eye (1985: 247, 288–9). Indeed Helen Keller, blind and deaf since she was nineteen months old, described the sense of smell as 'a fallen angel,' but insisted on 'the nobility of the sense which we have neglected and disparaged' (1908: 574).

The topic of smell itself is perhaps vaguely 'distasteful' to some, even 'gross'. Adams (1986: 24) suggests that:

> For many people [smell] has aspects of bestial sexual behaviour summarized in the image of two dogs mutually sniffing. Most of us do not smell as good, for as much of the time, as we think we should.

Perhaps for these reasons, olfaction has been hardly researched compared to the other senses, except until recently. Yet physiologically, olfaction is an extremely powerful sense. A healthy person may be able to detect, with training, between 10 and 40,000 different odours; while experts, such as parfumers or whiskey blenders, may be able to distinguish 100,000 odours (Dobb 1989: 51). But such estimates are hard to verify. Some scientific dimensions of olfaction have been explored by the National Geographic Smell Survey. The largest survey on smell ever conducted, with 1.5 million respondents, published some interesting findings: women can smell more acutely than men, in general; reactions to odours, positive or negative, vary widely around the world; nearly two in three people have suffered some temporary loss of smell, and some, about 1 per cent, cannot smell at all. Yet the loss of the sense of smell is a serious matter, for smell is often associated with memory. Kipling said that 'Smells are surer than sounds or sights to make your heart-strings crack'. This survey provided scientific evidence of the link between smell and memory. One man wrote (Gilbert and Wysocki, 1987: 524):

> One of my favourite smells is cow manure. Yes! It brings back memories of me on my aunt's farm in southern Ohio. The vacations I spent there were the happiest

of my childhood, and any farm smell evokes wonderful memories.

Helen Keller agreed: 'Smell is a potent wizard that transports us across thousands of miles and all the years we have lived. The odor of fruits wafts me to my southern home, to my childhood frolics in the peach orchard. Other odors, instantaneous and fleeting, cause my heart to dilate joyously or contract with remembered grief' (1908: 574). Smell may be a 'fallen angel,' neglected, disparaged and taken-for-granted but it is nonetheless a 'potent wizard,' particularly with respect to memory.

For some people, smells evoke memories (cf. Gibbons, 1986); for others, memories evoke smells. In his autobiographical novel, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, James Joyce as Stephen Dedalus remembers his childhood and schooldays as a constant succession of odours: the 'queer' smell of oilcloth on his bed; his mother, who 'had a nicer smell than his father'; and he loved the 'lovely warm smell' of his mother's slippers toasting before the fire. At school 'Nasty Roche was a stink'; and he remembered the 'cold night smell in the chapel. But it was a holy smell. It was not like the smell of the old peasants who knelt at the back of the chapel at Sunday mass. That was a smell of air and rain and turf and corduroy. But they were very holy peasants.' There was the 'weak sour smell of incense,' the smell of altar wine, which made him feel 'a little sickish,' the 'strange solemn smell ... like the old leather of chairs' in the rector's room, the smell of stale water, and the 'smell of evening in the air, the smell of the fields in the country where they digged up turnips ... the smell there was in the little wood' (Joyce, 1964: passim). George Orwell also remembered his schooldays in olfactory terms: 'a whiff of something cold and evil-smelling – a sort of compound of sweaty stockings, dirty towels, faecal smells blowing along corridors, forks with old food between the prongs, neck-of-mutton stew, and the banging doors of the lavatories and the echoing chamber-pots in the dormitories' (1968: 348).

The evil smells which Orwell recalled are congruent with the very bad times he experienced in this school. *The physical odour and the metaphysical reality are symbolically reciprocal.* Good times equate with good smells: even cow manure smells great because it evokes such wonderful memories; conversely, bad times equate with bad smells. Smells are often evaluated, therefore, by the positive or negative value of the remembered context. The meanings of odours are therefore extrinsic and individually or socially constructed.

Odour, memory and meaning are therefore intimately linked, and reach deep into our personal lives, all day, every day. One expert remarked: 'We think our lives are dominated by our visual sense, but the closer you get to dinner, the more you realize how much your real pleasure in life is tied to smell. It taps into all our emotions' (Gibbons, 1986: 327).

Olfactory appreciation, positive or negative, is also constructed, not only by personal memories but by specific teaching and training, by parents and by experts. We are socialized into what our culture considers to smell fragrant or foul, and into nasal 'taste'. Some individuals enjoy more olfactory sophistication than others; these are principally people who have 'trained'

their noses: parfumiers, tea-tasters, chefs, oenophiles and others, although the debate rages as to whether 'the nose' is born or created. Helen Keller, however, was perhaps the most famous nose, and she explained that her nose helped her to 'learn much about people. I know often the work they are engaged in. The odors of wood, iron, paint, and drugs cling to the garments of those who work in them. Thus I can distinguish the carpenter from the iron-worker, the artist from the mason or the chemist. When a person passes quickly from one place to another, I get a scent impression of where he has been – the kitchen, the garden or the sick-room' (Keller, 1908: 575).

Furthermore Keller stated that adults (but not children, perhaps surprisingly) generally emit a distinct 'person-scent'; this is more than the 'smell-print,' unique to each individual like a fingerprint which bloodhounds and other dogs can identify, for Keller attached powerful values to these scents. Her opinion is worth considering, not only because she had a superb 'nose,' but also because she raises the interesting question of the relation between odour and personality. She suggests that (1908: 575; cf 1974: 246, 314–5):

> Some people have a vague, unsubstantial odor that floats about, mocking every effort to identify it. It is the will-o'-the-wisp of my olfactive experience. Sometimes I meet one who lacks a distinctive person-scent, and I seldom find such a one lively or entertaining. On the other hand one who has a pungent odor often possesses great vitality, energy and vigor of mind.
>
> Masculine exhalations are, as a rule, stronger, more vivid, more widely differentiated than those of women. In the odor of young men there is something elemental, as of fire, storm and salt sea. It pulsates with buoyancy and desire. It suggests all things strong and beautiful and joyous and gives me a sense of physical happiness.

A similar heightened olfactory sensibility is recorded by a medical student, after getting high on amphetamines: 'I had dreamt I was a dog – it was an olfactory dream – and now I woke to an infinitely redolent world – a world in which all other sensations, enhanced as they were, paled before smell'. The man had suffered a form of temporal-lobe epilepsy and become hyperosmic: 'I went into the clinic, I sniffed like a dog, and in that sniff recognized, before seeing them, the twenty different patients who were there. Each had his own olfactory physiognomy, a smell-face, far more vivid and evocative, more redolent, than any sight face'. After three weeks his senses returned to normal (he had also enjoyed increased visual perception); but he does experience a certain nostalgia: 'That smell-world, that world of redolence ... So vivid, so real! It was like a visit to another world, a world of pure perception, rich, alive, self-sufficient and full. If only I could go back sometimes and be a dog again' (Sacks, 1985: 156–8).

The opposite can also happen. Another man entirely lost his sense of smell after sustaining a head injury. He discussed this with Dr. Sacks (1985: 159):

When I lost it – it was like being struck blind. Life lost a good deal of its savour – one doesn't realize how much 'savour' *is* smell. You *smell* people; you *smell* books, you *smell* the city, you *smell* the spring – maybe not consciously, but as a rich unconscious background to everything else. My whole world was suddenly radically poorer.

Evidently the physical possibilities exist for a far richer, fuller and more elemental olfactory social life; and we do not even appreciate the muted olfactory life which we have. Our sense of smell is therefore perhaps despised and neglected in large part because it is not fully understood nor appreciated.

Odour and the Moral Construction of the Self

Odour is not only a physiological phenomenon, it is also a moral phenomenon, for odours are evaluated as positive or negative, good or bad. It is this moral dimension of olfaction which makes smell of such compelling sociological, and economic, significance.

Odour is a significant component of our moral construction of reality and our construction of moral reality. The fundamental hypothesis is simple: what smells good, *is* good. Conversely, what smells bad, *is* bad. I will illustrate these equations with examples from food and drink, the environment and, the important point, people. I should clarify at the outset that what I am attempting to demonstrate is how people *think* about odours, i.e. in metaphorical and symbolic terms, not the odours themselves. The odours themselves are intrinsically meaningless. To paraphrase Hamlet: 'there is nothing either fragrant or foul, good or bad, but thinking makes it so'.

Food and Drink

We validate these symbolic equations every day as we smell our food and drink. By their odour we eliminate all things bad: putrid fish, rancid meat, rotten eggs, sour milk, vinegary wine, and the usual burnt rice. The odour indicates the reality, good or bad, edible or inedible, fairly reliably.[2]

What is bad, stinks. And we can and do sniff out the world. This is neither hyperbole nor metaphor; it is simply how we use our noses. Conversely, if the aroma is delicious, the food itself is delicious, for most of the sense of taste is the sense of smell. The phrase 'Ummm! That smells good!' neatly equates the physical – chemical and the symbolic – moral realities.

Environment

Just as we judge food as good or bad by their odour, so we also judge the environment. We relish the scent of flowers, the fresh air and the sea. And we avoid negative effluvia: human waste products, sewage systems, traffic fumes, air pollution, the stench of pulp and paper mills, fish plants and meat-packing plants, and now cigarette and cigar smoke. They smell bad; they are bad: toxic, carcinogenic or nauseating.[3]

People

We judge people the same way as we judge food and the environment. If a person smells 'bad,' or deviates from the olfactory cultural norm, the odour may be a sign that there is something wrong with their physical, emotional or mental health. The odour is a *natural sign* of the self as both a physical and a moral being. The odour is a symbol of the self.

This olfactory symbolism is evident in the extreme case of being downwind of a downtown vagrant. More routinely, olfaction is still a useful tool in medical diagnosis. But the symbolism is most apparent in our language, which embodies and reinforces this value-system.

We may describe someone as smelling 'divine' or 'beautiful,' 'lovely' or just plain 'good'; yet all these adjectives are also evaluations and moral judgments. Description is prescription. The aromas are converted from physical sensations to symbolic evaluations.[4]

We may say someone came out of a situation 'smelling like roses'. Conversely we may refer to a villain as a 'stinker' or as a 'foul' person. We may describe immoral activities as 'stinking to high heaven' or say 'I smell trouble'. Foul refers equally to ethics and odours.

In sum to decribe someone or something as *smelling* good or bad is to imply that this someone or something *is* good or bad. This equation is built into our language. It is also, as we have seen in the examples of food and environment, fairly reliable. In the case of people it may have some scientific value or it may be inaccurate, we shall see; but it is nonetheless a constituent element in the moral construction of the other, and the symbolic presentation of the self.[5]

Shakespeare was particularly aware of how we 'think through our noses,' so to speak, and was adept at painting olfactory portraits, particularly of villainy. Hamlet sniffed out that 'Something is rotten in the state of Denmark' and soliloquizes: 'I doubt some foul play: would the night were come! Till then sit still my soul: foul deeds will rise' (Act 1, Scene 2). The King, who has murdered his brother and married his brother's wife, laments: 'O my offence is rank, it smells to heaven' (Act 3, Scene 3). Evil stinks.

It is not only offences that stink, so do evil people: the evil is absorbed into the very body and skin of the self. So Lady Macbeth also laments: 'Here's the smell of blood still; all the perfumes of Arabia will not sweeten this little hand' (Macbeth, Act 5, Scene 1). The physical and the moral are united in odour.

Similarly, the senses reinforce each other. Just as the evil is ugly and stinks, so the good is fragrant and beautiful. In his fifty-fourth sonnet, Shakespeare rhapsodizes how truth gives a sweet odour which beautifies beauty:

O how much more doth beauty beauteous seem
By that sweet ornament which truth doth give;
The rose looks fair, but fairer we it deem
For that sweet odor which doth in it live.

'Fragrance is truth, and truth fragrance,' to paraphrase Keats; and the sweet odour beautifies the beautiful. Beauty smells sweet.

The reciprocal equations can therefore be reformulated: the good is fragrant and the fragrant is good; conversely the evil is foul and the foul is evil: what smells bad is bad, and what is bad smells bad.

Confirmations and applications of these (metaphorical) truths can be found in much of our lives, but particularly in the tendencies of conflicting parties to *impute* foul odours to each other. If people are defined as being evil, they are defined at the same time as smelling foul. Evil stinks, and enemies smell. Examples are legion in class and ethnic relations. Thus odour becomes a method or a tool of self-glorification and other-deprecation.

The process starts very young. Even children do it. The last word in the argument goes to the kid who yells at the enemy: 'Anyway you smell!'.

Again, the odour of sanctity, a beautiful fragrance, was said to adorn the saints even after death (Classen, 1990).[6] Conversely, the devil, it is said, smells like hell: a combination of pitch, brimstone and sulphur, they say.

Today success is valued more than sanctity; so we refer to 'the sweet smell of success'. And this too has its opposite: 'the sour taste of defeat'.

In sum, smelling odours is not simply a pleasurable or painful chemical experience, which may or may not trigger memories, and alter moods or behaviour, it is also a symbolic and moral phenomenon.

King James I described the evils of smoking in sensory and physiological and moral terms; in his much quoted *A Counterblast to Tobacco* he describes smoking as:

> A custom loathsome to the eye, hateful to the nose, harmful to the brain, dangerous to the lungs, and the black, stinking fume thereof nearest resembling the horrible stygian smoke of the pit that is bottomless.

The 'loathsome' looks, the 'hateful' smell, the 'harmful' physical consequences to the brain and the lungs, the blackness of the fume and the stink resembling hell all symbolically reinforce each other. The negativities of vision, olfaction, physique, colour, and morality are all aspects of one negative, in the traditional view. They all 'correspond'. These equations are not simply a medieval conceit or superstition, but are deeply rooted in our language and culture and are indeed contemporary.

Laundry not only has to be clean, but it has to *smell* clean (often lemony-fresh!). People are also expected not only to be clean but, in many environments, to *smell* clean, but not in all contexts.[7] Criminal acts may be described as 'stinking to high heaven,' but conversely the police in London may be described as 'the filth'. Ethics, like odours, are relative; but in the last cultural resort, heaven smells heavenly, and hell stinks.

This dichotomous polarization of good against evil and fragrant against foul, and the reciprocal symbiosis of good as fragrant and evil as foul, constitutes the paramount power of olfaction in contemporary society. In this sense, expenditure on colognes, perfumes, aftershave and other fragrances is not only an investment in the presentation of the self, but it is also a major

component in the *moral* construction of the self.

'Beauty is in the eye of the beholder,' it is often said; but as Voltaire and Darwin observed long ago, beauty is also in the *culture* of the beholder (cf. Synnott, 1989). Similarly, smell is in the nose of the smeller, but also in the culture of the smeller (Engen, 1982; Moncrieff, 1970). But the *meanings attributed to odours* (however defined) can be as significant as the meanings attributed to beauty or ugliness, the fragrant and the foul, in the western traditions. Smelling good is a sign of being good.

The anthropologist, Edward T. Hall, following Marshall McLuhan, has suggested that people of different cultures 'inhabit different sensory worlds,' and that this may be more important, for cross-cultural communication, than their different languages. For example, 'Americans and Arabs live in different sensory worlds ... Arabs make more use of olfaction and touch than Americans' (1969: 2–3). 'Arabs consistently breathe on people when they talk ... To smell one's friend is not only nice but desirable, for to deny him your breath is to act ashamed. Americans, on the other hand [are] trained not to breathe in people's faces' – thus they communicate shame to Arabs while trying to be polite. Similarly, 'Arabs do not try to eliminate all the body's odors, only to enhance them in building human relationships,' unlike deodorized and reodorized Americans. In matchmaking, the broker 'will sometimes ask to smell the girl, who may be turned down if she doesn't "smell nice". Arabs recognize that *smell and disposition may be linked*' (Hall, 1969: 159–60. Emphasis added). So did Helen Keller in a literal sense, and Shakespeare in a symbolic sense, as we have seen.

The anthropology of smell developed by Hall has 'resonance' not only in Keller and Shakespeare but also in Patrick Süskind's recent novel *Perfume* (1986). A brillant and murderous Parisian parfumier distills the essences of the scents of beautiful women, and creates the perfect perfume; this perfume has such an intoxicating effect on women that they want him, literally, and in their desire for him they rend him apart. Not all the critics enjoyed the novel (e.g., Adams, 1986); but Süskind only took the promises of the advertising corporations at face value, and carried them to their logical conclusions. Consider the Old Spice advertisement: 'Starts the kind of fire a man can't put out' (Largey and Watson, 1972: 1030).

It is said 'we are what we eat' – but it is also true that we are what we smell like: fragrant or foul, good or bad.

Odour and Power

Odour contributes not only to the moral construction of the self, but also to the moral construction of the *group*. Smell is not simply an individual emission and a moral statement, it is also a social attribute, real or imagined.

George Orwell has argued that smell is 'the real secret of class distinctions':

> [The] real secret of class distinctions in the West ... is summed up in four frightful words ... *The lower classes smell* ... [No] feeling of like or dislike is quite so fundamental as a *physical* feeling. Race-hatred, religious hatred, differences of

education, of temperament, of intellect, even differences of moral code, can be got over; but physical repulsion cannot ... It may not greatly matter if the average middle class person is brought up to believe that the working classes are ignorant, lazy, drunken, boorish and dishonest; it is when he is brought up to believe that they are dirty that the harm is done. (Orwell, 1937: 159–60. His emphasis.)

Another Englishman, Somerset Maugham, had made a similar point:[8]

In the West we are divided from our fellows by our sense of smell. The working man is our master, inclined to rule us with an iron hand, but it cannot be denied that he stinks: none can wonder at it, for a bath in the dawn when you have to hurry to your work before the factory bell rings is no pleasant thing, nor does heavy labour tend to sweetness; and you do not change your linen more than you can help when the week's washing must be done by a sharp-tongued wife. I do not blame the working man because he stinks, but stink he does. It makes social intercourse difficult to persons of sensitive nostril. The matutinal tub divides the classes more effectively than birth, wealth or education (in Orwell, 1937: 161).

Times change and standards of living have risen. Perhaps the lower classes no longer smell so different from the upper classes. Or perhaps they do. Evidence from France suggests that hygienic practices vary significantly by socio-economic status. According to a 1976 survey, 43 per cent of French women of executive, industrialist or professional status, bathe or shower at least once a day, compared to 10 per cent of those in farm worker households and 17 per cent of women in manual worker households (Bourdieu, 1984: 205). Comparable data for men are not available. These data suggest the possibility of different olfactory realities by status; but this is a possibility only, since daily baths or showers are probably neither medically, socially nor olfactorily necessary. Nonetheless, the distribution of odours does symbolize the class structure of society, whether by body odours or by the quality and expense of fragrances. We do sniff each other out, literally as well as figuratively.

Where the British have been preoccupied with smell and class relations, North Americans have been equally concerned with smell and race relations. Thomas Jefferson expressed the thoughts of many Whites when he stated that Blacks have 'a very strong and disagreeable odour'. Edward Long, a virulent Jamaican planter, wrote in 1774 that Blacks have a 'bestial or faetid smell'. Dr. Benjamin Rush, a noted abolitionist in the 1790s, agreed and attributed this smell to leprosy (Jordan, 1969: 459, 492, 518; cf. 256–7).

The history and politics of olfaction have rarely been studied, but Alain Corbin has investigated odours in France in the 18th and 19th centuries. Almost every population group was said to have its own distinctive odour, and some were described in great detail. Peasants, nuns, redheads, Jews, Blacks, Cossacks, cleaners, Germans, Finns, ragpickers, the poor, virgins, prostitutes ... They all smelled different, with the odour tending to reflect the im-

agined moral status of the population: virgins good, prostitutes bad. Sailors were among the worst (Corbin, 1986: 147):

> His customs are debauched; he finds supreme happiness in drunkenness; the odor of tobacco, wedded to the vapors of wine, alcohol, garlic, and the other coarse foods that he likes to eat, the perfume of his clothing often impregnated with sweat, filth and tar make it repulsive to be near him.

The description of odours, fragrant or foul, therefore becomes a covert moral labelling. And such labelling of class, ethnic and other groups persists today. But such moral labelling, based on olfactory beliefs, does have practical social consequences. Gunnar Myrdal observed (1944: 107):

> The belief in a peculiar 'hircine odor' of Negroes, like similar beliefs concerning other races, touches a personal sphere and is useful to justify the denial of social intercourse and the use of public conveniences, which would imply close contact, such as restaurants, theaters and public conveyances.

And, one might add, schools and jobs. He added: 'It is remarkable that it does not hinder the utilization of Negroes in even the most intimate household work and personal services' (1944: 107).

John Dollard discussed the belief 'very widely held both in the North and the South' that 'Negroes have a smell extremely disagreeable to white people'. He described it as one of many 'defensive measures' adopted by racist Whites: 'a crushing final proof of the impossibility of close association between the races' (1937/1957: 380). Thus smell 'justified' institutional segregation and racial oppression in the United States, as it 'justified' class prejudice and discrimination in the United Kingdom.

North Americans have not been alone in this. Adolf Hitler deplored the smell of the Jews, and said it was symbolic of their 'moral mildew' (1924/1942: 42):

> Cleanliness, whether moral or of another kind, had its own peculiar meaning for these people. That they were water-shy was obvious on looking at them and, unfortunately, very often also when not looking at them at all. The odour of those people in caftans often used to make me feel ill ... but the revolting feature was that beneath their unclean exterior one suddenly perceived the moral mildew of the chosen race.

For Hitler there was a clear union of exterior and interior, outer and inner impurity, odour and morality. Foul smells were not just unpleasant, they symbolized an inner rottenness.

The racist tradition reverts back to the United Kingdom as Ian Fleming, in one of the James Bond novels, refers to the 'feral smell of two hundred negro bodies' (1954/1978: 55) – Blacks as animals again. And a London dock-

worker commented on Pakistanis: 'They smell don't they?' (*Time*, May 20, 1970: 38; in Largey and Watson, 1972: 1023). A rather uncertain prejudice, but it does demonstrate the role of odour.

Odours, therefore, both real and imagined, may serve to legitimize inequalities of both class and race, and they are one of the criteria by which a *negative moral identity* may be imposed upon a particular population.

Gender also factors into these equations. Men are supposed to smell of sweat, whisky and tobacco, according to Kipling; and women, presumably, are supposed to smell 'good': clean, pure, and attractive. Certainly the advertising appeals of perfumes are very different, both pictorially and verbally, for men and women. In general the advertisements seem to promise happiness, luxury, glamour, and the other sex; but in some, the message of violence is overt.

In the seventies, an advertisement for *007* cologne stated: '*007* gives men license to kill ... women'. Another for *By George* is: 'She won't? By George, she will' (Largey and Watson, 1972: 1030).[9] Violence is legitimized. No means Yes. And sexual conquest is a male right.

In the nineties the theme persists. In general, the names of the perfumes, colognes and fragrances seem to express not only different but almost opposite self-concepts for the so-called opposite sexes. A partial list of women's perfumes and fragrances includes the following: Beautiful, Passion, Joy, Lumière, Mystère, White Shoulders, White Linen, Ivoire, Cover Girl, Enchantment, Chantilly, L'Emeraude, Le Jardin, L'Aimant, Paris, L'Air du Temps, Diva, and such spicy brand names as Basile and Coriandre. They express a wide range of values – but the list is very different from this partial list of men's fragrances: Boss, Brut, Imperiale, Toro, Eau Sauvage, Aramis, Polo, Hero, Gray Flannel, English Leather, Bogart, Maestro, L'Homme and Gentleman, and such cowboy themes as Stetson, Chaps and New West.

The brand names alone socialize and educate the 'opposite' sexes into opposite roles, as do the advertising images, the verbal texts, and the packaging colours and styles. As opposites, these brand names transform biological differentiation into social hierarchy and power: pink or blue, Beautiful or Boss, Ivoire or Imperiale, Passion or Polo, Joy or Toro, and so on.

There are exceptions to this simple gender dichotomy. Some fragrances are named after the house: Chanel, Ralph Lauren, Giorgio, etc., and these names do not socialize users so forcefully into opposing values, although the advertising shots and the 'hype' may do so. Also some products are marketed for both women and men, although the fragrances are different. Thirdly, some women's fragrances do not fit into these traditional dichotomies at all, like Charlie. Indeed Charlie was perhaps the first fragrance to break the ancient stereotypes with the 'Charlie' woman in the advertisements patting the man on the behind and, with a second item of role reversal, using a man's name. The fragrance sold well, not least because of the image it conveyed of a capable, modern liberated woman. Since then, new fragrances have been labelled with a more deadly and lethal set of values: Poison, Opium, Obsession and Evil (by Elvira); and others are more active, animalistic, and car-

nivorous: Action, Animale, and Panthère. Despite these changes, the traditional beautiful, joyous and passionate images are still the norm for women.

Finally, some fragrances for both sexes project not only non-sexual images but also quite bizarre ones: Bazaar, Quorum, Fahrenheit, Red Door, Blue Grass, Cabochard, Old Spice, Kouros and others. Who would want to smell like a bazaar? or a quorum? and what does Fahrenheit smell like? But perhaps this is being too literal; maybe the images appeal.

The gender polarization is therefore neither complete nor total: there is an overlap and there are exceptions; but the polarization is nonetheless dominant. Fragrance is politics.

The political power of fragrance is reinforced by the texts, the visual imagery, and the packaging of the products; but these have been discussed by others (Goffman, 1976/1979; Williamson, 1978). The sexual politics of odour is much more than the fragrance industry, however, and more intimate and personal. Whites may have detested the smell of Blacks (and vice versa, as we shall see), and the upper class may have disliked the smell of the workers (and vice versa), but there is also a long and strong tradition in male humour and literature that, to paraphrase George Orwell, 'the real secret of gender relations in the West is summed up in four frightful words: the female sex smells'. The number of jokes to this effect are legion and will not be repeated here. Suffice it to say that one of the functions of humour is to put down other people. Sexist jokes, like racist ones, may be funny to some people but offensive to, and also oppressive of, the targeted population.

The tradition in male literature is ambivalent. Some men enjoy the smell of women. Mothers, it seems, smell nice and comforting, as in Gunter Grass' *The Tin Drum*; and virgins smell sweet, according to a French tradition, for 'the tender odor of marjoram that the virgin exhales is sweeter, more intoxicating than all the perfumes of Arabia,' wrote a Frenchman in 1846 (Corbin, 1986: 183). The loved one may smell lovely, like 'strawberries and cream' in Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922/1971: 372). Robert Herrick (1591–1674) flew into nasal ecstasies over Anthea: her breasts, lips, hands, thighs, legs, 'are all/ Richly aromatical'. And in the breast of Julia, 'all the spices of the East/ Are circumfused'. Another lady is described as a garden of olfactory delights, of 'blooming clove,' 'roses,' 'spiced wine,' 'jessimine,' 'honey,' 'oringe flowers,' 'almond blossoms,' warmed amber, the 'mornings milk and cream,' 'butter of cowslips,' and more ... 'Thus sweet she smells'. Not only did Herrick love these personal scents, but he also attacked the fragrance industry; he prayed one lady: 'From Powders and Perfumes keep free/ That we shall smell how sweet you be' (1921: 59, 69, 145, 111).

But there is another side to this male discourse. Henry Miller was the first to introduce vaginal odour into public discourse, in *Tropic of Capricorn* (1922/1962: 113–4; cf. Corbin, 1986: 246). But on what terms? What did it mean? Kate Millett answers, in her forthright style: 'This is reality, Miller would persuade us: cunt stinks, as Curly says, and cunt is sex. With regard to the male anatomy, things are very different, since 'prick' is power' (1970/1978: 430–1). Miller's polarization of female and male, stink and power, cunt and prick, is an intrinsic component of his oppression of women.

'What Miller did articulate,' says Millett (1970/1978: 413), 'was the disgust, the contempt, the hostility, the violence, and the sense of filth with which our culture, or more specifically, its masculine sensibility, surrounds sexuality. And women too; for somehow it is women upon whom this onerous burden of sexuality falls'.

The dynamics of sexism, racism and classism are therefore similar in this political definition and exploitation of olfaction.

Indeed an entire feminine hygiene industry has been built on this perception that women smell. Commenting on the successful market strategies for 'intimate deodorants,' Haug has noted that in Germany in the late sixties 43 per cent of females between the ages of 16 and 60 were protecting themselves, and others, against their own body odours, and 87 per cent of 19 year olds. Haug commented (1971/1986: 77):

> From now on the human body smells repellant ... This process can be called the moulding of sensuality. It demonstrates vividly how blind mechanisms of profit-making, as an essentially indifferent means to an end and a by-product of profit, can alter human sensuality.

Germaine Greer angrily satirized the 'brilliant boffins' of the toiletries industries for 'inventing the problem (at one and the same instant as its solution) of vaginal odour ... After all, it's not as if the streets had been littered with those overcome by vaginal fumes' (1987: 63–4).

This conjunction of patriarchy and capitalism has created a need, and fulfilled it, at some economic benefit to the few, and perhaps a high social cost to the many. It is difficult to estimate the social costs of the destruction of self-esteem and the creation of self-nausea (if any); but Shere Hite's (1976) survey on female sexuality included a very direct question: 'Do they [your vaginal and genital area] smell good or bad?' The responses ranged widely. Thirty per cent replied 'good' or 'great'; 15 per cent said 'bad'; 1 per cent said 'neither'; and 8 per cent said 'sometimes good, sometimes bad'. The rest gave either generally positive answers: okay, good if clean, sexy, natural, exciting, stimulating, unusual, interesting, yummy, funky, earthy, desirable, for a total of 41 per cent; or generally negative answers: 4 per cent. In sum, about 71 per cent of the sample were generally positive and 19 per cent were generally negative. If Haug and Greer are correct in their analysis of vaginal deodorants, however, then attitudes may become increasingly negative. Odour differentiation legitimizes patriarchy and gender inequality, therefore, as it did and does class and race inequality.

Although smells are employed to justify hegemony, the same tactics are also employed by disenfranchized populations to challenge the unequal status quo; and the terms of the debate are just as intimate, blunt and crude. Orwell observed that 'orientals say that *we* smell. The Chinese, I believe, say that a white man smells like a corpse. The Burmese say the same – though no Burman was rude enough to say so to me' (1937: 174). The Japanese used to describe the Europeans as *bata-kusai*: 'stinks of butter'

(Gibbons, 1986: 348). Malcolm X also remarked that whites 'were different from us – such as ... the different way that white people smelled' (1966: 17; cf. 26, 273). The olfactory politics of Jefferson, Fleming, Miller and others is therefore countered by the olfactory politics of the Burmese, the Japanese, Malcolm X and others.

Diamond Jenness reported a frank exchange with a Copper Eskimo on the subject of ethnic odours during the Canadian Arctic Expedition of 1913–1918 (1923: 39):

> There seems to be quite a distinctive odour exuded from their skin different from that of white people. An old woman once asked me whether I had noticed an objectionable odour about them when I first arrived in their country. I stated that all our party had noticed it, and she answered 'That is not strange, for we noticed the same thing about you'.

As with ethnic relations, so with gender relations. Men also smell. Television advertising in particular 'shows' that men, more than women, have bad breath, need powerful underarm deodorants, have smelly feet requiring odour-eating charcoal filter inserts in their shoes, and they have ring around the collar. 'Secret' deodorant, for instance, is 'strong enough for a man but made for a woman,' which implies that men smell stronger, i.e. worse, and it is boys and men who play in the mud and get filthy. Biologically, men have more apocrine glands than women, and sweat more; and in the semiotics of advertising, as in biology, men seem to be the major polluters of the domestic environment, while women are the major cleaners of the same place. In sum, men are portrayed as dirty and smelly all over, from mud or oil or smoke-smeared faces and dirty necks to their feet. Men's smells are dispersed over the entire body. Women's smells, in contrast, are semiotically centred on the genitals, as discussed earlier. This is not so much ironic as another indication of patriarchal misogyny, the psychic displacement of women from their bodies, as Greer and Haug argued, and the pathologization of corporeal normality.

Women sometimes say that men stink, of booze, sweat, smegma or whatever. A survey of women in St. Louis recently asked: 'What one thing do you look for in a significant relationship?' The number one answer was 'good hygiene' (*Montreal Gazette*, 4.9.90). Not cash but a wash. To paraphrase Orwell again: 'The real secret of gender relations in the West is summed up in two frightful words, men smell'.

Smell is as political as the vote.

CONCLUSION

Nietzsche, one of the few philosophers to consider the significance of odour, commented bluntly:

> What separates two people most profoundly is a different sense and degree of cleanliness. What avails all decency and mutual usefulness and good will toward

each other – in the end the fact remains: 'They can't stand each other's smell!' (1966: 221).

Smelling good and smelling bad are constituent elements in the presentation of the self and the construction of the other, whether these odours are natural, manufactured or symbolic. Thus people attract and repel each other.

The profound intimacy of olfaction and perfume lies in the fact that one person is breathing and inhaling the emanations of another person. Thus the two people become one, in an olfactory sense; and in the empire of odour, the fragrance is the aroma of the soul.

A primary role of odours in our culture is aesthetic. People de-odorize and re-odorize to smell nice, to feel good, to be beautiful and to attract. These symbolic interpersonal relations are only a small part of the arena of olfactory sociology. Ethnic, class and gender relations are also all mediated by odours, real or imagined. And odour is not only symbolic and political, it is also as we have 'seen,' economic.

The use of artificial fragrances has a long history, going back at least as far as the Egyptians and Babylonians. Fragrances have been used, and often still are, in many religious ceremonies in many faiths around the world, in social and political rituals, from dating to coronations, in food preparation, in healing rituals, to mask unpleasant odours, and they have been used in the Arab world, in the mortar for the construction of certain mosques (Thompson, 1927/1969).

Indeed the origins of artificial fragrances in Judaeo-Christian culture are divine. The Lord himself instructed Moses to create a perfume, and gave him the formula of myrrh, cinnamon, cane, cassia, and olive oil (*Exodus* 30: 22–4). Pleasing God and pleasing other people are only two of the many functions of odour.

A good nose is still a useful diagnostic tool in medical practice (Smith et al., 1982; and see the correspondence in *The Lancet*, 5 February, 1983: 292–3). In this 'sense,' the odour does betray the *physical* state of the self – but not the moral state, as prejudiced people have argued.

David Howes (1987), one of the few anthropologists to study the sensorium, has described the widespread use of olfaction in rites of passage, noting both the phenomenological variations from culture to culture, but also the changed meanings of odour in our own culture.

Today, however, some of the principal concerns with odour are legal, industrial and sexual. Olfactory pollution is increasingly being debated and researched as a risk to health and to comfort. Smell is now a legal matter. Howes, again, has investigated some of the legal implications of industrial pollution and has suggested that such smells may be 'not as much a cause of discomfort as an idiom through which anxiety about social status is expressed' (1989/90: 30). In our terms, the presentation of the self in favourable olfactory terms is negated by an environment of foul-smelling industrial effluvia.

Industrial pollution is one aspect of olfactory sociology; yet another is the

fragrancing of industrial production. Aromas do have significant industrial application. In Japan studies indicate that exposure to certain fragrances, even subliminally perceived, has positive psycho-physiological effects, results in the increased efficiency of meetings, and a decrease in the incidence of keypunch errors. One company has developed a computerized system to circulate fragranced air through a hotel, a convention centre, and an office tower. The Fragrance Foundation reports (1988):

> Specific types of fragrances would be used to meet the different needs of each area. Lemon, proven to have a stimulating effect, would be filtered into the hotel with the goal of energizing visitors in morning conferences or inspiring a mood of festivity in the banquet rooms in the evening. Jasmine would work to soothe weary guests. To eliminate anxiety within the convention center, the scents of seasonal flowers and ocean breezes would be suggested. Lavender and peppermint would help to lessen mental fatigue and reduce the urge to smoke in a stressful workplace. Used in an athletic facility, these scents would activate the circulatory system. The sophisticated scent of Japanese cypress has a relaxing effect, cinnamon piped into lounges would 'induce calmness'.

Piped fragrances, with the piped and purified air, and piped music: the control of the sensory environment is being maximized. Co-ordinated colours caress the eye; and food and drink are chemically flavoured and coloured. The senses may now be utilized, not by ourselves to perceive the world and communicate with others, but by others to maximize productivity, lessen fatigue, enhance performance, inspire festivity, or induce calmness.

The senses are not only a medium of communication with others but also a medium of control by others. 'Big Brother is watching you,' was the theme of George Orwell's *1984*; but in the 1990s he is also directly controlling you, perhaps subliminally, by odour.

The general public has been particularly interested in the search for the ultimate aphrodisiac: a human pheromone. While many researchers doubt that humans will respond to odours as automatically as some animals and insects, nonetheless, for some people, any response at all would be appreciated! (Weintraub, 1986; White, 1981; Hassett, 1978). The irony is that as we deodorize and reodorize, we probably destroy, at least temporarily, whatever pheromones we secrete, and indeed prevent the very chemical reactions which we are attempting to induce. The very odours which are sexually attractive may also be socially unacceptable: an aphrodisiacal Catch-22.

It is no doubt partly in response to an appreciation of the significance of odour that, in recent years, research into olfaction has increased substantially, both in quantity and in scope. The Fragrance Foundation conducted literature searches of two major scientific biomedical data bases, MEDLINE and BIOSIS, produced by the U.S. National Library of Medicine. The two bases overlap somewhat, but MEDLINE is principally medical, and BIOSIS principally in the life sciences. The total number of olfactory related publications

listed in MEDLINE increased from 710 in 1966 to 2,535 in 1987: a 3.6-fold increase; in BIOSIS the increase was almost 6-fold, from 675 in 1969 to 3,957 in 1987. Since the total number of publications had also increased considerably, however, we need to know the relative, as well as the absolute, increase. The Foundation calculated that: 'In MEDLINE the proportion of olfactory related publications doubled over the time span, while in BIOSIS it tripled' (Fragrance Research Fund, 1989: 3–4).

The First International Conference on the Psychology of Perfumery was held at the University of Warwick in 1986. This effectively institutionalized research on olfaction and fragrance and was the first multidisciplinary and joint industrial-academic conference on the topic. The published papers indicate the current range of research (Van Toller and Dodd, 1988), and although no sociologists presented papers at the conference, this may mark a turning point in the recognition of the significance of olfaction in society.

To conclude, olfaction plays important but often unnoticed roles in our culture – perhaps more important *because* unnoticed. We have focussed principally on the moral construction of the individual and various populations in the political economy of olfaction. Nonetheless, even with this brief overview it is clear that odour has powerful aesthetic, sexual, spiritual, medical, and legal as well as emotional, moral, political and economic implications; and that these are intertwined.

Ultimately, odour is a constituent component of individual and group identity, both real and imagined. Yet it is also much more than that, and pervades and invades every domain of our social lives.

NOTES

1 The ranking and evaluation of the sensorium is discussed more fully in Synnott (1991).

2 There are exceptions, notably cheeses, and some cheeses more than others.

3 This is why Reynolds Tobacco is now re-odorizing their cigarettes with a vanilla fragrance. The physical effects on the smoker and other inhalers of the side-stream smoke will be similar: it is still carcinogenic. But it is expected that the emotional reaction of the public will be different. The odour will be coded differently: the meaning will be different. People will still get sick, but they will feel better about it! And so will Reynolds!

4 Smell is like sight in this, that beauty, looking 'good,' is equated with goodness, truth and many virtues and positive attributes; while ugliness, looking 'bad' is equated with sin ('as ugly as sin') and negative attributes (cf. Synnott, 1989).

5 Hitler and Stalin are two examples of individuals who are widely regarded as evil: they are normatively defined in negative terms by the majority of North Americans. I am not suggesting that they actually did smell 'horrible' in chemical terms, as determined by research tests or anecdotes. We are discussing symbolic, not chemical, odour. But we do *impute* foul odours to immoral or evil people, i.e. those who are culturally defined as deviant in negative terms; furthermore, if we hate people we probably hate their odours and even their perfumes or fragrances; and if we love them, we tend to love their smell too. Just as beauty is in the eye of the beholder, so also fragrance is in the nose of the smeller.

6 In discussing this odour of sanctity, Gonzalez-Crussi, who is himself a physician, cites an investigation which suggests that some, at least, of these odours may have been caused by, for instance, an overdose of medication or, in the case of Saint Theresa of

Avila, by her diabetes. In this case, he concludes, 'the odor of sanctity has the formula CH2 COCH2 COOH. Is there nothing sacred anymore?' (1989: 78; cf. Corbin, 1986: 244–5).

7 The evaluation or decoding of odours is not only subjective, it is also contextually relative. An odour which is acceptable on a building site or a farm or a rugby pitch is not necessarily equally acceptable in a lecture hall, a bus or a bedroom, and vice versa.

8 Maugham was no socialist, unlike Orwell. But his remark that 'the working man is our master' is just silly, particularly since he wrote this in 1930, during the Great Depression. His assumption that working-class wives are 'sharp-tongued' is unnecessary. Why not hard-working? And his failure to relate the matutinal tub to 'birth, wealth or education' is another example of blaming the victim.

9 These advertisements may be 'only' media hype; but they do subliminally reinforce and recreate a climate of violence against women. The tradition is long enough and vile enough already, including as it does Jack the Ripper, Ted Bundy, Marc Lepine, and many others.

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