

# A dirty job, but somebody's got to do it ...

A survey over several months of contract cleaning sites in Brussels and London uncovered the forms of managerial arrangement that work to deny cleaners the social and occupational recognition they aspire to. They create conditions that are a breeding ground for psychosocial disorders.

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Repulsion and disgust are universal reactions to filth and soiling. In most societies, contact with them is shameful and surrounded by taboos, purification rites and a raft of social do's and don'ts. The Indian caste system is probably the best-known example of the institutionalization of these prescribed norms. The castes assigned tasks involving contact with bodily emissions, organic waste and death are viewed as impure and consigned to the bottom rung of the social status ladder. The aversion principle, based on fear of contamination, ensures that they keep their distance by prescribing intra-caste endogamy and establishing a set of social rules relating to the physical and social distance to be kept from members of other castes. This is why, given the nature of the activities reserved for them, the untouchables are effectively "outcasts", assigned to the bottom-most rung of the social ladder and, as their name suggests, forbidden any physical contact with members of other castes.<sup>1</sup>

The extreme nature of the prescriptions associated with the Indian caste system has long been disapproved of in Western societies, where the application of such radical principles would be quite simply unthinkable. And yet Western societies are not free of aversion to soiling – in the broadest sense – and the individuals whose work brings them into close contact with it. In the 1950s, the American sociologist Everett Hughes found that a host of occupations are socially deprecated because of their physical closeness to bodily emissions, filth or death. He also revealed that the stigma which typifies what he called "dirty work" is passed onto the individuals who do it by association with the object of their labour, as the "personification" of it.<sup>2</sup> They are generally made to feel that degradation by a lack of deference or respect, by being talked down to, acts of discrimination, and even to the extremes of avoiding contact.<sup>3</sup>

**1.** Deriving from the Portuguese word *casta*, the very term "caste" means "that which is not mixed". Read about the caste system: Delière R. (1993) *Le système des castes*, Paris, Presses universitaires de France, coll. *Que sais-je ?* and Douglas M. (2001) *De la souillure. Essai sur les notions de pollution et de tabou*, Paris, La Découverte, coll. Poche.

**2.** Read about "dirty work": Hughes E.C. (1951) "Work and the Self", in Rohrer J.H., Sheriff M. (Eds.), *Social psychology at the crossroads*, New York, Harper & Brothers, p. 313-323; Hughes E.C. (1958) *Men and their works*, Glencoe, Free Press; Hughes E.C. (1962) "Good people and dirty work", *Social Problems*, 10, p. 3-11.

**3.** Ashforth B.E., Kreiner G.E. (1999) "How Can You Do It? Dirty Work and the Challenge of Constructing a Positive Identity", *The Academy of Management Review*, Vol. 24, No. 3, p. 413-434.

Nothing is clearer than cleaning's connection with fouling, which classifies it beyond doubt as "dirty work". My own survey of the cleaning sector bears out the way those who do this job are daily disrespected through abusive treatment and institutional distancing mechanisms.

## Disrespect

Cleaning workers face two sources of disrespectful treatment in their daily work: from those who benefit from their work, and from their own superiors. Cleaners get the message from the evidence left by the former. A Ghanaian cleaner who works nights in the London offices of an international bank said: "They throw their rubbish on the floor instead of in their wastebasket. People are like that – they think, 'Oh the cleaners'll be coming in to clear it up.'"

A Moroccan cleaner working in Brussels has the same kind of feeling: "If we find the toilets in a disgusting state, we write: 'Please leave the toilets clean and tidy', and the next day when you come back, it's as if they've done it on purpose!"

It's a fact of daily life that the cleaners have got used to, even though it shows contempt and disregard for them. But there are also more extreme expressions of disrespect, like that reported by a Cameroon cleaner, working in the offices of a London-based multinational: "At one point, there was one particular person who kept on 'doing his business' on the floor [...] I said to the women: 'Don't clean it up. He's doing it on purpose! Don't clean it up. Call the manager and show it to him! That's not our job. Don't do it!'"

Faced with such extreme and degrading cases, the cleaners often make it a point of honour to rebel, to lay down the limits of their job and the amount of stigmatisation they are

willing to put up with. In cases like these, they tend to have more scope for reacting than when the disrespect comes from their own superiors, which seems very common in the business.

One cleaner said: "Once we were in the lift and the assistant manager said [right in front of us]: 'I'm not getting in the lift with them.'" So she waited and took the next one. Our supervisor is Ghanaian. My team has one lady from Nigeria, two from Ghana and one from Sierra Leone. We're used to working together. So at one point, our supervisor started calling us 'My ladies'. The assistant manager turned round to the supervisor and said, "Who are you calling your ladies? You don't call them ladies! They aren't ladies!" Nobody said anything back, because the more you say, the more you get it indirectly taken out on you. So nobody said anything back. You have to stay calm, do your job and go home."

Talking about their direct supervisor, two Colombian women cleaners who work the day shift in a big insurance firm based in the City of London say:

"That supervisor treats us like dirt, he humiliates us.

— He uses vile language to us.

— The last one was what he said to me. I was outside and there were no witnesses. I was just sticking a notice on a wastebasket. He said: "Stick it there!" But it was special sticky tape and I didn't know. So he started in on name-calling "dopey bloody tart, stupid cow!"

The cleaning agents suffer regular belittlement and insults, but their precarious situation allows them no real way of demanding the respect they are denied.

### Avoidance by design

As a service activity, cleaning should create a service relationship. But outsourcing and competition let customer firms ignore the staff who are cleaning their premises. By arranging their cleaning duties outside busy times and keeping them well away from other workers – cleaners' cubby holes are often situated in basements or car parks – customer firms purposefully make their cleaning workers invisible by designing out the co-presence that could create service relationships – i.e., contacts between cleaning workers and the workers that benefit from their services. While this institutionalised distancing is regularly excused away by "practicalities" – to avoid interference with service recipients' work – the zeal with which it is enforced suggests other considerations may be in play. Many cleaners are clear that the nature of the work they do is part of the reason for keeping them out of sight in time and space.

One cleaning team leader working in government offices has this to say on working hours: "The fact is that we do a job where you don't get to see people. My feeling is that they make sure we're out of the way before

staff start arriving, so that there's no contact between us. I always wonder why we couldn't start our job at 8 o'clock in the morning. Why? What's the problem? We'd start at 8, finish at 11. Where's the problem? We'd have contacts with people; there'd be fewer complaints because people would be able to ask directly if they needed something. We'd do the offices in work hours. If need be, we could wait the vacuuming to late afternoon."

A cleaner of Bulgarian origin employed in Brussels, offended by the instructions to go via the car park so as not to pass through some of the concourses she helps keep clean has the ironic comment: "They'd flush us out through the drains if they could!"

### An overdue identity

Cleaning workers are painfully aware that the lack of respect and systematised distancing they undergo are based on a personification process through which they are pretty much equated with the object of their labour: dirt. One woman cleaner explains the correspondence principle she suspects to be at work behind the blank looks of staff on the site she cleans at: "They wouldn't talk to a rubbish bin, so they don't talk to you."

Similarly, when asked about his negative attitude towards his job, a team leader hastens to clarify: "It's not me that looks down on it, it's them we work for who look down on it: we're cleaners, so we're like something on the bottom of their shoe. [...] They [the customers] think that because we're cleaners, we're just crap. That's what gets me."



**Ever bigger areas to clean per hour. Workers pay a heavy price for the unbridled competition between cleaning firms.**

Image: © Vincen Beeckman

For cleaning workers, the expressions of disrespect and distancing are all evidence of their inferior status and make it hard to identify positively with their job.

"We're at the bottom of the ladder. Who's below us? Nobody. OK, you can trot out stuff like "a job's a job, this is Europe, it makes no difference". Well, all I can say to that is, "yeah, right!"

In conditions like these, many cleaners have a hard time maintaining a robust and enduring self-esteem. Many, too, feel embarrassed or worthless. In reality, the expressions of disrespect and avoidance measures act to deny workers in this industry the social and professional recognition to which they like most other workers aspire. In societies where the job you do is a lot of who you are, it is hardly surprising that such barriers to developing a positive professional identity cause severe psychosocial conditions. ●

### Read more

- Scandella F. (2009) "Travail invisible dans un secteur de relégation : la double condition des nettoyeurs de bureaux", *Les mondes du travail*, n° 7, juin 2009, p. 75-86.
- Scandella F. (2009) "Les cols bleus des cols blancs' ou le déni d'une relation de service. Le cas du secteur du nettoyage dans le quartier européen de Bruxelles", in Appay B., Jefferys S. (coord.), *Restructurations, précarisation, valeurs*, Toulouse, Octarès, p. 311-324.