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The Representation of Waste

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The brightest rooms are the secret domain of faeces.

-Theodor Adorno

The longstanding controversy and ongoing protests over toilets – whether bucket, communal, or portable – in the Western Cape turns on the question of whether it is possible to stop talking crap and actually speak meaningfully about the biological, social, and political elements of healthy human excretion.

How is a fundamental question of human rights being obscured by a host of trite euphemisms about “poo protests” and “gutter politics”?

Beyond the residue of a Victorianism which would have us simply turn away in feigned shock and dismiss an act of protest as nothing more than the “disgusting” work of a few “uncivilized barbarians”, how do we interpret and debate what it means when a society’s citizens are motivated to spread excrement across the roads and over the steps of public buildings?

Instead of dismissing the conflict as a squabble between political parties, what is our obligation, a most basic human obligation, to reflect seriously on the sense of vulnerability that accompanies the act of entering a “toilet” without a door and squatting over weeks if not months of accumulated human fecal matter?

A reply to these questions requires that we step outside the bright lights and dim strictures of polite society and begin to talk about what we are actually talking about.

The mouth and the anus are related in fundamental and complex ways. Anyone who thinks otherwise can begin to recover from their delusion by consulting a standard 6 biology textbook (if they are ever delivered) or reading a bit of Freud.

Start with the biology, the physical conditions of life. Human beings must eat. Portions of what we take into our bodies must come out. Without the possibility of evacuation, the act of eating is toxic, just as the introduction of fecal matter into food produces illness.

Given this equation, what does it mean to lack a toilet? What does it mean to have a toilet that threatens the demands of nutrition? What does it mean to avoid available toilets because the cost of their use is nothing less than humiliation? Whether the question is a matter of access, quality, or outright dread, the answer is the same. A society that prevents or deters defecation is a society that allows citizens to live (barely) only if they can navigate between the precarious edges of starvation and self-poisoning.

The political implications of this reality appear fully only as we are willing to risk a bit of uncomfortable honesty.

Everyone has had the experience of needing to evacuate their bowel with an urgency that makes everything else secondary. Whether it happens at the mall, during a party, in the car or on the train, or with the onset of a flu, this moment is singular and definitive. Drowned out by the voice of our body, the rest of the world fades into the background. The act of conversation becomes excruciating if not impossible. The notion of deliberating over whether one really needs to find relief is as silly as it is insulting. Until the need is relieved, there is literally nothing to say.

The implication is obvious. Of course the act of collecting and spreading feces in public spaces breaks the rules of so-called reasonable political debate. That's the point. Reaching back to the apartheid bucket system and running through last year's actions against the installation of open toilets, the ongoing protests are yet another demonstration of the fact that public discussion and deliberation presuppose a basic level of physical comfort.

The representation of human waste, literally a re-presentation of feces, by protestors is thus nothing less than a claim as to how government has defined so many humans as being nothing more than a waste of representation, as unworthy of taking part in politics or contributing to decisions about how to distribute the finite resources allocated for development and poverty alleviation.

When nowhere to go is the same thing as being trapped, it is wholly insensitive to suggest that citizens are somehow keen to highlight let alone distribute their feces, as if they were auditioning for a German scat film (arguably the most bourgeois form of pornography on the planet) or as if we did not know that the cost of a plumber is a direct function of the volume of suburban shrieking that attends a broken toilet which threatens to put a turd on the floor. There is no joy in any of this. It is

a moment when living conditions have deteriorated to the point where such action becomes imaginable. It is what happens when the inability to live normally becomes normal.

Nothing interesting or good comes from glumly shaking our heads and concluding that politics has turned everything to shit. Such a response overlooks that the issue which underlies the protests is fundamentally non-partisan. At stake is a basic question of expression, one that both challenges the ANC's cynical advice that the people must continue to struggle only in pre-approved ways and betrays the piety of the DA's promises of political inclusivity.

This does not mean, however, that the protests will produce change. Given the inclination of officials to act only after the cholera breaks out and given the apparent disinclination of elected representative to actually use the facilities they install for their constituents, one cannot help but wonder about the value of building and reserving a loo or two on the Grand Parade. If built without doors and provisioned with the same equipment being offered to communities, the very sight of such facilities might serve to remind some of those whose bathrooms are freshened each morning of the precise ways in which excretion is deterred when it affords a chance for passersby to evaluate today's choice of underwear, wiping technique, and the extent of meticulous hairstyling.

Humiliation is a tangible experience. To reduce the current situation to electoral shenanigans or a breach of political etiquette is to miss that the excrement on the N-2 and on the steps of government buildings represents a failure of representation, a situation in which the forces of history, poverty, and governance have made it impossible for thousands of human beings to relieve and express themselves in a manner that does not culminate in their degradation.

A wide angle lens is important. Through it, it becomes possible to see that the protests are an expression of a much larger rage, a demonstration of Hannah Arendt's acute observation that those most in need of human rights are those deprived of the voice needed to claim their protection.

Cape Town