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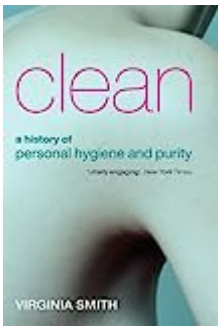

Virginia Smith. *Clean: A History of Personal Hygiene and Purity.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008. 480 pp. $19.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-19-953208-7.

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Published on H-Water (March, 2010)

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Of Cleanliness and Godliness

Clean: A History of Personal Hygiene and Purity is an immensely readable book that discusses a critical aspect of our lives affecting our bodies every day; that is, cleanliness. The norms governing what is perceived as clean and good are defined by society and culture, and studying them can yield a fascinating social and cultural history of preventive medicine. Virginia Smith adds a temporal dimension to how societies and cultures have (re)interpreted matters relating to cleanliness, purity, and hygiene. She considers three–or even four–historical dimensions piled on top of one another, overlapping through time in the ten chapters of this book.

Cleanliness, according to Smith, represents an ancient craving of humans to groom the self, a primordial, "neolithic," love of beauty. Purity to her is more a "man-made" affair, but lies deeper, more at a psychological level than that of the body. At times, the sense of purity produced refined religious or supernatural ideologies of divine perfection and pollution, concepts that were socially imposed on animal nature and the material world. For Smith, hygiene has more to do with wholesomeness and "the regimen of health." While the first half of the book sketches out these main themes in detail, the second half deals with the subsequent literary and social history of European personal hygiene in its original, and much broader, ancient Greek sense.

Many of us were taught that cleanliness is next to godliness, and it is through purity and hygiene that the material body could be fused holistically with the immaterial divine world. However, as we learnt to spend ever more time to preserve our bodies, the religious mind at the same time genuinely despised the very close and happy associations of hygiene with beauty, women, and sex. Consequently, not only did religion wipe out the history of grooming and cosmetic care from the European records, the rise of positivist sciences such as demography, which concentrated on the facts and figures of births, deaths, and population increase, reduced public or private hygiene to a minor demographic factor. Cleansing became the crucial link to survival, stripped of its historical, social, and cultural contexts.

Yet, in spite of the march of Hygiene in a linear fashion progressing towards a clean utopia, uncleanliness, impurity, and unhygiene have not all vanished from this earth. Things overlap in space and time, and to deal with as multifaceted a phenomenon as cleansing, one needs an orchestra of histories to account for all the continuities.

Water was the supreme ingredient that played, and continues to play, a key role in modern personal hygiene. Clean drinking water was the first human necessity even for the most ancient civilizations. Humans have been using water for washing and bathing since the Neolithic times; some late Neolithic technology addressed the questions of domestic water supply and drainage, of transporting it in leather, earthen, or shell containers, and of heating and boiling large amounts of water on hot stones. Bathing rituals–particularly in natural hot springs–must have started about then as did artificial "stoving" or sweat-bathing. Today hot saunas continue to provide relaxation, detoxification, and "good times" and are perceived as cleansing the "inner parts" of the body as much as the outer. Indeed, the history of cleanliness is circular and remains unfinished; the intangible concepts of purity and pollution assumed a physicality in water and embodied themselves in the caste system in the ancient Hindu religion of India, which prohibits the upper castes from drinking water that has been merely touched by the lower castes. It is in these tropical latitudes that grooming–and Smith does not mean only physical purification but cosmetic embellishments to highlight social status and wealth–assumed great importance. Cleanliness gradually extended from the touch of the body to its vision, to smell and adornments. Cosmetic recipes kept one well and healthy, it was believed, and indeed some arts of grooming that were associated with urban dwellers of ancient cities have continued until today in the form of tattoos.

Smithâs greatest accomplishment in this book is to bring into the discussion the counter-narratives to cleanliness, religious asceticism being one that reconfigured European culture after the fall of Rome. The ascetic philosophy of purity, flowing from the moral duty to "know thyself," became more important than the secular hygienic duty to "look after yourself" and subsequently constrained, cleansed, or physically altered many bodies of devout men and women. The connecting thread in these narratives and counter-narratives remains water, or divine holiness embodied as water sprinkled on the impure body to cleanse it from all its filth. Even at a much later date, Smith shows how popular concerns in contemporary physiology or health have concentrated on public baths and wash-houses for the poor, or on sanitation and water for the exploding cities, or on how the poor in England came to be known as the "great unwashed."

Although the ten chapters of the book are arranged according to sequential time, and the last few pages predictably look at possible future trends, the book vividly brings out a number of commonalities and overlaps of themes across the temporal boundaries. The first of them is how, in almost every time, cleanliness started with the body, but moved beyond it–to inner beauty, inner health, or even into the sphere of metaphors of social prestige expressed through the body. The second is the skillful weaving of opposing themes in cleanliness–how the rejection of physical cleanliness by some could also mean attaining a higher status or state than that to which the physical body can take us–in Christianity and other religious traditions. The last commonality–and I wish this were explored in greater detail than the space given to it by Smith–is the role of water as a purifier, a carrier, and a symbol of cleanliness. For water is culture, its consumption central to unlocking some of the mysteries of contemporary societies and for unpacking cleanliness and normality.[1]

At the beginning of her book, Smith acknowledges its Eurocentrism, so we do not really expect to receive detailed discussions on how "other" societies and cultures perceived cleanliness over time except in passing. If Smith were to rethink any one aspect of the book, she might profitably begin with sex and gender, taking the difference between men and womenâs bodies as the starting point. Looking at cleanliness as a highly gendered practice would fully open a few vistas that have remained only lightly touched on or even neglected in this book. I can only hope that cleanliness, menstruation, and purity of womenâs bodies and the role of water in washing away the pollution will be her next book, and I eagerly await it.

Note

[1]. Elizabeth Shove, *Comfort, Cleanliness and Convenience: The Social Organization of Normality* (Oxford and New York: Berg, 2003).

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Citation: Kuntala Lahiri-Dutt. Review of Smith, Virginia, *Clean: A History of Personal Hygiene and Purity.* H-Water, H-Net Reviews. March, 2010.

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