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Hygiene and Pollution: French soldiers gaze upon dirt, dust and disease

The eighteenth century saw many changes in the way people thought about bodily hygiene, smells, rotting matter and pollution. These changes however were gradual and emanated from the elite, and older understandings of the intersection between environmental, bodily and moral-spiritual pollution still loomed large alongside more modern notions of disease and cleanliness. This post will consider the ways French soldiers saw, described and thought about dirt, disease and pollution in Italy and Egypt. Some of their ideas now seem humorous, others still feel very relevant, especially when we consider these men as, in a sense, tourists. Ideas of insanitary conditions, fears and realities concerning the spread of contagious disease and the descriptions which link these with moral degradation; examined together will allow us to penetrate some way into the mental universes of these men living on the cusp of changing understandings and who were exposed to the stresses of experiencing strange places and alien cultures. The ways in which they understood and related their experiences should cast some light not only on the shifting ways of thinking about cleanliness and disease, but also on ideas of moral superiority and national identity as bound up in simple social practices.

Insanitary Conditions: Marshes, Narrow Streets and Bad Air.

Prevailing understandings of the properties of air were undergoing radical changes during the eighteenth century, scientists proposed new theories as to its effect on health and the body. The French Royal Society of Medicine conducted a major inquiry among its correspondents as to the incidence of different illnesses in different regions at different times of year, one of the main themes of which was the quality and character of the air. These elite preoccupations seem to have either reflected or influenced the way in which French soldiers during the Revolution thought about the atmosphere. Soldiers on both campaigns made reference to 'unclear air' which Laugier for instance, believed emanated from the marshes around Mantua. Bricard agreed that the entire area was 'extremely unhealthy'. Such swampy terrain elicited similar complaints in Egypt where, around Lake Manzaleh, Millet was convinced that the unclean air from the marshes was causing widespread disease. A concern with the insanitary effects of swamps and marshes was widespread during the eighteenth century and clearly found its way into the soldiers' thinking. Worse yet was the Kamsin, a desert wind which they believed caused temporary and sometimes permanent blindness.

Urban hygiene was also a concern, the narrow streets which they frequently complained about were thought to allow bad air to linger and encourage disease to breed. Bricard's disgust is palpable when he writes of 'the narrow dirty streets...small shops offering repulsive food, unhealthy lodgings' and went on, without a hint of irony, to decry how 'the poor sleep in filth, never undress and are crawling with vermin'. Were they to have looked twice at French towns, especially Paris they would have seen similar conditions. Their surprise and disgust, should not surprise us however, the unfamiliarity of the environment meant that similarities with home were easily lost in the kaleidoscope of conflicting sensations. This contradictory effect of gazing upon, and inhaling, a new and richly different environment was reinforced when they visited the merchant or European quarters that existed in some Egyptian towns. Grandjean described the one in Cairo as 'better built and cleaner than the rest of the city'.

From what is known about urban environments in eighteenth century Europe, they were clearly guilty of applying double standards. It is instructive that despite frequently having to put up with filthy lodgings and the putrefying gore of battlefields, the soldiers who saw and smelt the dirt of both Italy and Egypt, but particularly the latter, expressed their disgust in the strongest of terms, disgust that indicated a moral judgment as well as a purely physical one. Vaxelaire's horror at the 'terrible smell and lack of cleanliness' can be understood given that he came from the unpolluted Vosges Mountains. The disgust of urbanites, especially Parisians such as Bricard, is less easy to comprehend but must at least in part be due to the perception of difference assailing their senses while trying to navigate an often hostile and threatening environment.

Cleanliness and Contagion: Curious Conceptions and Medical Mentalities.

Even today it is not that uncommon to hear people voice their distrust of medicine and doctors, the profession had an even more ambiguous reputation in the past. Many soldiers, Girard in Toulon and Bonnefons in Antibes among them, preferred to hide their illness or injury rather than entrust themselves unto the questionable care of military hospitals. At the same time soldiers were more exposed to doctors than any other non-elite members of society and so did see the advantages of medical treatment for certain problems. However they did enthusiastically shared their folk-remedies and quack cures and understandings of medication and health were, by modern standards, somewhat ridiculous. They did however understand the benefits of bathing. The dragoon lauded the virtues of the Nile's waters as clean and purifying while Grandjean became very attached to Hammam baths which he qualified as 'very necessary and good for the health' and Henry Laurens reports that the troops were recommended to bathe regularly. Others used their own conceptions of cleanliness to mock,

or at least question the ritual ablutions integral to Islamic practice. Charvet for instance observed that 'they are so superstitious that they believe this will remove any stain'. In this context the word tache could be understood as either a moral stain or a dirty mark or both, illustrating the subtle intersection of physical and moral pollution.

Ideas of cleanliness to avoid falling ill were one thing but once the soldiers did catch something their ideas about how to cure it were eccentric. Millet was convinced that he survived the plague by lancing the boil that developed, praying and not going anywhere near the hospital. Chatton's memoir included instructions for a poultice of fresh pigeon blood that a Neapolitan had shared with him for his unspecified illness, and Bricard highly recommended the blend of aqua amara and quinine, used to treat fevers in northern Italy. He also complained about the sale of the army's stock of wine which he saw as 'among the most vital necessities for curing the unfortunates who had fallen ill'.

Understandings of how to avoid contagion were more sophisticated, the dragoon held that the 'huge number of public ladies who infest the camps have caused numerous illnesses'. Moiret also remarked that 'even the most intrepid libertines would recoil in horror at the filth of the brothels'. He also wrote at some length about the variety of diseases which afflicted the inhabitants and the French troops which he put down to 'unhealthy air, dirty water' and general pollution. The worst of these diseases however was the plague, which struck a number of times during the expedition. Thurman assiduously used a tweezers to dip his possessions in vinegar to disinfect them during an outbreak of the plague, demonstrating the medical progress and keeping him alive while those around him died. Quarantines were established and hospitals struggled to deal with the infected. One French doctor was publicly humiliated for having refused to treat plague victims. His punishment was to be brought around the city on a donkey, dressed in women's clothing with a sign around his neck which read 'this man does to deserve to be called French, he is afraid of death'. The contradictory rumours about the plague illustrate the often contorted thinking around disease. On one hand it was often repeated, by Pépin and Charvet for instance that the French and other Europeans were less at risk of infection than locals. Thurman wrote that 'I think the disease spared all the natives in Aboukir', indicating an idea that somehow the Europeans suffered more from it. Millet was convinced that it was a consequence of the filth in which he insisted the Egyptians lived, wherein 'they left dead animals rotting in their yards and streets, corrupting the air and allowing pestilential illnesses to flourish'. Others, including Malus described the disease in all its horror as an equal opportunities killer which spread between friends and family members regardless of race or status. These, along with the mixed attitudes towards medicine and

strange ideas of cures and cleanliness shine a light on the transitional nature of understandings of sickness and health at the time and across different social classes and levels of education. While some responses to disease were genuinely effective, others had nothing whatsoever to do with medical treatment and were informed by popular attitudes, rumour, superstition and prejudice.

Polluted Streets, Polluted Minds: Discourses of Dirt and Degradation.

The prejudices which led some soldiers to see themselves as more immune to disease than Egyptians, and others to see the Egyptians as somehow protected from the disease are but one way in which the cultural encounters between French soldiers and natives in both Italy and Egypt can shed light on constructions and imaginations of identity. Throughout a significant number of the surviving accounts a certain set of parallel imagery depicting locals (especially in Egypt) as somehow both morally and physically unhygienic and dirty. Thus Bricard's ethnographic description of Egyptians blends images of people 'living in utter filth like animals do in Europe' with 'the horror we felt when confronted with the habits and mores of the inhabitants'. Sometimes the prevalent dirt and pollution are seen to be linked with the supposed moral decay, the laziness, incompetence and perverse sexual practices Egyptians were accused of. Millet for instance inferred a connection between the degeneration of Egyptian civilisation, 'the Turks' laziness and lack of involvement in commerce...since they are so insanely jealous they constantly monitor their women instead', and then goes on to liken their 'dirty, ugly cabins' to 'foxes' holes'. Such a collage of perspectives provides us with a perfect intersection of judgments and mentalities around morals, decay, hygiene and humanity. In other situations the locals themselves seem to have been dehumanised to the point of being seen as a type of dirt that needed, in the dragoon's words, 'to be cleaned from the environs of their bivouac'. Similarly to the way in which David Barnes has shown that social transgressions were linked to disease in the popular imagination in France, the dirt was in some way symbolic of the inferiority of the Egyptians and was intimately related to their other perceived defects.

These are fascinating possibilities for two reasons, not only do they look backwards to Early-Modern conceptions of religious hygiene and moral pollution of communities by members of other confessions but they also look forward to colonialist discourses about locals' need for civilisation and how European settlement and rule would allow these inferior and debauched people to rise above their current lowly status. Both of these conceptions infer a legitimisation of violent cleansing, whether it is from a religious and moral perspective or a civilising and secular standpoint. Both seem to have informed the thinking of the common French soldiers

in Egypt who in a sense provide a link between these two different ways of enacting an imagined mission to cleanse the world. The dragoon suggested that to clean Egypt of prostitutes ‘they should be tied in bags and thrown in the Nile’, the river whose cleansing properties he had previously praised and whose waters the French had appropriated as their own by taking control of the annual flooding ceremony and using it to transport troops and the taxes and goods they had seized. Thurman, as always, gives an illuminating counter-example by describing ‘the extreme repugnance the locals had when it came to touching a French corpse’ in the clean up after the second battle of Aboukir.

The metaphors of dirt, decay and degradation which were used to portray the Egyptians as morally and in a sense intellectually incapable of rational choice or self-rule were props which justified conquest, massacre and extraordinary punitive taxes and other requisitions. The way in which soldiers wrote about the Dutch further supports this interpretation. Putigny noted the cleanliness and prosperity of the Dutch peasantry while Laugier lauded the ‘good order and cleanliness’ he saw all over the Low Countries. These were clearly civilised fellow Europeans, who needed French help to regain their liberty but were not degraded or degenerate in the same way as they saw the Egyptians.

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See also

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