'The Dirt of Cities, the Aura of Cities, the Smell of the Dead, Utopia of an Odorless City'

from H_2O and the Waters of Forgetfulness (1986)

Ivan Illich

Editors' Introduction

Ivan Illich was a radical anarchist whose work explored the archaeology and history of ideas. His project developed initially through four books published during the 1970s, *Deschooling Society* (1971), *Tools for Conviviality* (1973), *Energy and Equity* (1974), and *Medical Nemesis* (1976). Illich became concerned with providing a critique of the functioning of management and economics in society. These, he argued, are presumed to function to remedy problems of scarcity rather than to distribute welfare and resources. The thesis was also pursued in two collections *Toward a History of Needs* (1978) and *Shadow Work* (1981). The book from which this extract is taken, H_2O *and the Waters of Forgetfulness* (1985), examines the transformation in the idea of water. Initially imbued with mythic associations it came to mean nothing more than a liquid for the cleansing of cities. Like much of Illich's work it is polymathic in its approach, encompassing medicine, art, architecture and technology within the discussion.

Illich was born in Vienna in 1926 and lived and studied in south central Europe. He studied natural science, theology, philosophy, and history, obtaining a degree from the Georgian University, Rome and a Ph.D. in history from the University of Salzburg. During the 1950s he travelled to the United States where he worked as a priest amongst the Puerto-Rican community of New York. He later founded a centre for Cross-Cultural Studies in Puerto Rico and later in Cuernavaca, Mexico. Since the 1980s he has been Visiting Professor of Philosophy and of Science, Technology, and Society at Penn State University and has also taught at the University of Bremen. Ivan Illich died on 2 December 2002.

THE DIRT OF CITIES

When Aristotle drew up his rules for the siting of a city, he wanted the streets to be open to sunlight and to prevailing winds. Complaints that cities can become dirty places go back to antiquity. In Rome special magistrates sat under their umbrellas in a corner of the Forum to adjudicate complaints from pedestrians soiled by the contents of chamberpots. Throughout classical antiquity, beginning with the palace at Knossos (1500 B.C.), the dwellings of the wealthy occasionally had a special room for bodily relief. In Rome, wealthy households owned a special slave to empty the night-chairs. Most homes had no designated place for bodily relief. Like the sewers beneath the Athenian agora, the sewers beneath the imperial fora and pay seats in marble latrines were restricted to city areas covered with marble. In popular two-story dwellings, Roman ordinances required a hole at the bottom of the staircase. Otherwise, the street was

assumed to be the proper place for such disposals. Medieval cities were cleaned by pigs. There survive dozens of ordinances which regulate the right of burghers to own them and feed them on public waste. In Spain and the Islamic areas, ravens, kites, and even vultures were protected as sacred scavengers. These customs did not change significantly during the baroque period. Only during the last years of Louis XIV's reign was an ordinance passed that made the removal of fecal materials from the corridors of the palace in Versailles a weekly procedure. Underneath the windows of the ministry of finance, pigs were slaughtered for decades, and their encrusted blood caked the palace walls. Tanneries were operated within the city, even though their smell in the valley of Ghinnom had become the symbol for hell (gehenna) in old Jerusalem. A survey carried out in Madrid in 1772 disclosed that the royal palace did not contain a single privy. These millennial city conditions prevailed in London when Harvey announced his discovery of the circulation of the blood.[1] Only after the great London fire of 1660 and after Harvey's death were "laystalls" set up on London street-crossings for the disposal of waste, and an honorary scavenger was appointed for each ward to supervise the rakers – men and women willing to pay for the privilege of sweeping the streets so that they could sell the refuse for a profit. In 1817 the powers of these scavengers and rakers were codified in the London Metropolitan Paving Act, which remained the statute until 1855. By this time the houses of the well-to-do in London usually contained one privy, from which the night-soil was removed several times each week. But for the larger part of London, the collection of night soil from the streets remained sporadic. In the late nineteenth century it was felt to interfere with rush hours. It was not until 1891 that the London County Council prescribe that privy cleaning had to be restricted in summer-time to the hours between 4 A.M. and 10 A.M. Quite obviously, throughout history cities have been smelly places.

THE AURA OF CITIES

Nevertheless, the perception of the city as a place that must be constantly washed is of recent origin. It appears at the time of the Enlightenment. The reason most often given for this constant toilette is not the visually offensive features of waste or the residues that make people slip on the street but bad odors and their dangers. The city is suddenly perceived as an evil-smelling space. For the first time in history, the utopia of the odorless city appears. This new aversion to a traditional characteristic of city space seems due much less to its more intensive saturation with odors than to a transformation in olfactory perception.

The history of sense perception is not entirely new. Linguists have dealt with the changing semantics of colors, art historians with the style in which different epochs see. But only recently have some historians begun to pay closer attention to the evolution of the sense of smell. It was Robert Mandrou who, in 1961, first insisted on the primacy of touch, hearing, and smell in premodern European cultures. Complex non-visual sense perceptions gave way only slowly to the enlightened predominance of the eye that we take for granted when we "describe" a person or place. When Ronsard or Rabelais touched the lips of their love, they claimed to derive their pleasure from taste and smell, which could only be hinted at. Even the eighteenth-century writer does not yet describe the loved body; at best the publisher inserts into the text an etching that illustrates the scene, an etching which, during the early part of the century, effectively hides whatever is individual, personal, "touching" in the scene the author describes. But while it is easy to follow historically the ability of poets and novelists to perceive and then paint the flesh and landscape in their uniqueness, it is much more difficult to make statements about the perception of odors in the past. To write well about this past perception of odors would be a supreme achievement for a historian because the odors leave no objective trace against which their perception can be measured. When the historian describes how the past has smelled he is dependent on his source to know what was there and how it was perceived. The case is the same whether he deals with odors perceived by lovers or those that help physicians recognize the state of the ill or those with which devils or saints fill the spaces within which they dwell.[2]

I still remember the traditional smell of cities. For two decades I spent much of my time in city slums between Rio de Janeiro and Lima, Karachi and Benares. It took me a long time to overcome my inbred revulsion to the odor of shit and stale urine which, with slight national variations, makes all unsewered industrial shantytowns smell alike. This smell is the characteristic for the early stage of industry; it is the stench of dwelling space that has begun to decay because it is threatened by imminent incorporation into

the hygienic system of modern cities. It is distinct from the local atmosphere of a still vernacular town. A vernacular atmosphere is integral to dwelling space; according to traditional medicine, people waste away if they are sickened and repelled by the aura of a new place in which they are forced to live. Sensitivity to an aura and tolerance for it are requisites to enjoy being a guest. Many people today have lost the ability to imagine the geographic variety that once could be perceived through the nose. Because increasingly the whole world has come to smell alike: gasoline, detergents, plumbing, and junk foods coalesce into the catholic smog of our age. Where this smog mingles with the decay of vernacular atmosphere, as along the Rimac which carries Lima's sewage into the Pacific I learned to recognize the smell of development. It is there that I became sensitive to the difference between industrial pollution and the dense atmosphere of Paris between Louis XIV and Louis XVI. To describe it I shall draw heavily on Corbin.

THE SMELL OF THE DEAD

People then not only relieved themselves as a matter of course against the wall of any dwelling or church; the stench of shallow graves was evidence that the dead were present within its walls. This thick aura was taken so much for granted that it is rarely mentioned in contemporary sources. Universal olfactory nonchalance came to an end when a small number of citizens lost their tolerance for the smell of corpses. Since the Middle Ages, the corpses of clergy and benefactors had been entombed near the altar, and the procedures of opening and sealing these sarcophagi within the church had not changed over the centuries. Yet at the beginning of the eighteenth century, their miasma became objectionable. In 1737 the French parliament appointed a commission to study the danger that burial inside churches presented to public health. The presence of the dead was suddenly perceived as a physical danger to the living. Philosophical arguments were concocted to prove that the burial within churches was contrary to nature. An Abbé Charles Gabriel Porée, Fénelon's librarian, from Lyons argued in a book which went through several editions that, from a juridical point of view, the dead had a right to rest outside the walls. In his monumental history of attitudes toward death in the West since the Middle Ages, Philippe Ariès has shown that this new squeamishness in the presence of corpses was due to an equally new unwillingness to face death. Henceforth, the living refused to share their space with the dead. They demanded a special apartheid between live bodies and corpses at just the time when the innards of the live human body were beginning to be visualized as a machine whose elements were "prepared" for inspection on the dissecting table. Like the organs, the dead became more visible and less awesome; they also became increasingly more disgusting and physically dangerous for the living. Philosophical and juridical arguments calling for their exclusion from dwelling space went hand-in-hand with reported evidence of the deadly threat of their miasma. Corbin lists several instances of mass death among the members of a church congregation that occurred at the very moment when, during a funeral ceremony, miasma escaped from an opened grave. Burials within churches thereafter became rare – increasingly a privilege of bishops, heroes, and their like. The cemeteries were moved out of the cities. Though in 1760 the Cimetière des Innocents was still used for parties in the afternoon and for illicit love at night, it had been closed in 1780 by request of neighbors precisely because they objected to emanations from decomposing bodies. Yet even if the presence of the dead within the city was resented by rich and poor alike at the end of the ancien régime, it required almost two centuries to educate the lower classes to feel nausea from the odor of shit.

UTOPIA OF AN ODORLESS CITY

Both living and dead bodies have an aura. This aura takes up space and gives the body a presence beyond the confines of its skin. It mingles with the auras of other people; without losing its own personality, it blends into the atmosphere of a particular space. Odor is a trace that dwelling leaves on the environment. As fleeting as each person's aura might be, the atmosphere of a given space has its own kind of permanence, comparable to the building style characteristic of a neighborhood. This aura, when sensed by the nose, reveals the nondimensional properties of a given space; just as the eyes perceive height and depth and the feet measure distance, the nose perceives the quality of an interior.[3]

During the eighteenth century it became intolerable to let the dead contribute their aura to the city. The dead were either excluded from the city or their bodies were encased in airtight monuments celebrating

hygienic disposal, for which Père Lachaise became the symbol in Paris. In the process of their removal, the dead were also transmogrified into the "remains of people who have been," subjects for modern history – but no more of myth. Disallowing them shared space with the living, their "existence" became a mere fiction and their relics became disposable remains. In this process western society has become the first to do without its dead.

The nineteenth century created a much more difficult task for deodorants. After removing the dead, a major effort was undertaken to deodorize the living by divesting them of their aura. This effort to deodorize utopian city space should be seen as one aspect of the architectural effort to "clear" city space for the construction of a modern capital. It can be interpreted as the repression of smelly persons who unite their separate auras to create a smelly crowd of commonfolk. Their "common" aura must be dissolved to make space for a new city through which clearly delineated individuals can circulate with unlimited freedom. For the nose a city without aura is literally a "Nowhere," a *u-topia*.

The clearing of city space coincides with a new stage of the professionalization of architects. Their profession had formerly been in charge of building palaces, squares, fountains, city walls, and perhaps bridges or channels. They were now empowered to condemn dwelling space and transform it into garages for people. Observing the course of Peruvian settlement thirty years ago, John Turner has described what happens when dwelling *by* people is transformed into housing *for* people. Housing is changed from an activity into a commodity. This transformation requires making dwelling activities impossible, so that persons become domesticated docile residents within shelters which they rent or buy. Each now needs a street address with a house number (and, in some cases, an apartment number too). People have lost the aura that allowed their whereabouts to be sniffed out in the old days. When the idea of the new city, made up of residents, began to register in the minds of the leaders of the Enlightenment, everything that smacked of quality in space came to be objectionable. Space had to be stripped of its aura once aura had been identified with stench. Unlike the architect who constructed a palace to suit the aura of his wealthy patron, the new architect constructed shelter for a yet unidentified resident who was supposed to be without odor.

NOTES

1 For a general introduction to the history of sanitation, see Rawlinson and also Kennard. Gay is anecdotal and not documented. For London in late medieval times there are many facts on street cleaning and the technique of cesspool construction in Sabine 1934, 1937. For the hygienic conditions of Paris streets, Labande is full of details, Gaiffe dated and amusing.

2 Stench that kills not one but several persons on the spot is not new to the mid-eighteenth century. There are many previous reports of sinners killed on the spot by experiencing the devil's stench. What is new is the connection between the stench of decaying bodies and this physical effect. See Foizil and Ariès. All through the Middle Ages the sense of smell opened the gates of heaven and hell. Reports on the "odor of sanctity" perceived year after year by thousands of visitors to the grave of a saint are quite common. Deonna documents several hundred instances. Lohmeyer, Nestle, and Ziegler relate this experience to biblical texts. During the twelfth century the smell particular to the remains of saints was taken as evidence for the authenticity of such relics. There can hardly be any doubt about the widespread sharing of this experience. The perception of space and its characteristics by means of the sense of smell was taken for granted by the poets of the time. See Hahn ("Duftraum") and Ruberg, 89ff. A beautiful introduction to the "meaning" given smells is in Ohly. See also Ladendorf.

3 Giving off a smell is as much a part of a personality as casting a shadow, producing a mirror image, or leaving traces on the ground. In all of these "aura" becomes perceptible. People recognize one another by smelling out where they come from: "The Scots folks have an excellent nose to smell their countryfolk" (*OED*, 1756). One first relies on smell to discriminate among individuals: "What a man cannot smell out, a man may spy into" (*King Lear* 1, v, 23:1605). But "you can easily smell a rat," except that "where all stink, no one is smelled." The Latin proverb "mulier tum bene olet ubi nihil olet" quoted by Plautus has been variously translated: in 1529 as "A woman ever smelleth best, whan she smelleth of nothing" and in 1621 by Burton as "Then a woman smelleth best, when she hath no perfume at all." During this period "perfume" had changed its meaning. It had come into English as "odor", given off by incense or other burning substances and, by the time of Burton, had come to mean "scent." (See also Tilly, nos. S558 and R31, and F. Wilson, under "smell.")

During the second decade of the nineteenth century, the loss of "aura" becomes a major new motif in literature. It

can be readily traced by following the influence of A. V. Chamisso's *Peter Schlemihl*, who sells his shadow to the devil in exchange for wealth. The loss or sale of one's "soul" was a well-known motif at the time, but by retelling the folktale and insisting on the loss of something visible and observable, Chamisso created a veritable school. In 1815 E. T. A. Hoffmann told the story of a young man whose mirror image was taken from him by a whore and an eerie physician. W. Hauff's hero of 1828 exchanges his heart for a stone counterfeit to save himself from bankruptcy. By the end of the century heroes have sold "sleep," "appetite," "name," "youth," and "memories" (for details, see Ludwig 1920 and 1921).

The shadow had always been part of the full personality (Bächtol 9, Nachtrag 126–42). Only when a Greek becomes luminous himself, in the presence of Zeus or when an Iranian becomes a saint, does he lose his shadow. According to Irish stories, if a person's shadow is pierced, he dies (Stith-Thompson D 2061.2.2.1). Among the Jews a ghost is recognizable by its lack of a shadow (ibid., G 302.4.4), just as it is said to leave no footprints (ibid., E421.2). The exchange in which the student of alchemy leaves his shadow to his master the devil as an honorarium is a motif that appears only in the eighteenth century. The shadow remains secondary in fairy tales and folk literature (Franz 1983). In fairy tales everybody is always everybody's shadow (24, 31). The idea of the shadow (or, for that matter, of the mirror image or act of memory) as a saleable commodity is a new and important motif that appears with possessive individualism in Chamisso. It fits into the period during which people's "smell," their aura and their "moral economy" (E. P. Thompson) were taken from them.

Ultimately the drugstore became the symbol of the industrialized aura; it is the supermarket of mass-produced glamour and scents for a deodorized population. People who obsessively scrub away their auras can pick and choose a better one there. Musil (v. 7, p. 895) has created a prophetic image: "Schlemil's guilt is his bourgeois nature, his refusal to admit his loss of his shadow, his incapability of creating genius from it."