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## Circadian Rhythm

In the artificial glow of electric lights, avenues are repaired and sidewalks and public squares are cleaned. In Spanish we use the passive voice, preceded by “se” when the subject of the sentence is omitted. An action is taking place without an identified subject. It reads as if avenues, sidewalks, public squares, trees, public lighting, and other infrastructure maintained themselves, as if their state were free. The subjects of such work are rendered invisible on account of their standing as handlers of excesses. It is a job conceived to eliminate what we do not want to see and the workers who do it share the same fate.

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Keeping a place like Mexico City clean involves repairing, removing, or scrubbing a seething mass of imperfections with no beginning or end. It is the work of hundreds of thousands of hands kept busy so that the rest of us can move through it. Their goal: to remove time that has been transformed into dirt; it is a relentless task.

Maintain means “to have in one’s hands.” They grasp every square inch of city, tentatively, to make sure it is in

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good shape; they examine and feel, making sure it is sound. Their work is of such importance that, in times of epidemic, they have been recognized as essential workers.

Cleaning crews advance with motorized and manual sprayers and high-pressure power washers, disinfecting the city's main business districts and subway stations. They spray sidewalks, curbs, street furniture, posts, and handrails with a mixture of bleach and water.

Today, cleanliness and health are nearly synonymous, but it has taken hundreds of years to align those two universes to the point where they look alike to our common sense. Understanding health as a consequence of hygiene is a tendency that emerged in medicine in the nineteenth century and is known as "social hygiene."

The social hygiene movement has its origins in the fight against epidemics; it treats people as cells in a larger system, and imposes order and cleanliness not on an individual but on the social body. To eradicate epidemics, it manages the population as a whole. Its goal is preventive and it applies medicine on the scale of public policy. Its soul is in the order of bodies. For that reason, social hygiene found its way into the logic of governance, urbanism, and architecture; its application was assigned to groups regulated with military logic: police corps, doctors and nurses, cleaning crews, etc.

The social hygiene movement in Mexico City began with the late eighteenth-century Bourbon reforms. Count Revillagigedo made cleanliness, control, and order his priorities when he took over the government of New Spain in 1789. His reorganization brought with it the first public lighting project; works were undertaken to create the first underground sewer system; paving streets with cobble stones was planned; and the first public transportation system was created, transforming the city's landscape and health.

From this enlightened perspective, the public spaces of colonial life, streets and public squares, should no longer be places to spend time but to move through. People and goods, along with their fluids and soil, should only pass through. These ideas took more than a century to become part of the population's common sense, first with the Reform laws and then with Porfirian positivism.

Prior to this transformation, people used the streets as an extension of domestic life. Public squares were a Baroque whirlwind. It was common to defecate in public, pile garbage at intersections, use the street as a workspace for various trades, or set up vending stands. People washed

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clothing and animals drank from public fountains. People occupied and conducted their affairs in the streets, but Revillagigedo wanted them to be merely a place for movement, where nothing stood still.

Inside homes, where people's private lives played out and which were their preferred space for socializing and entertainment, architecture also underwent notable changes. Priority was given to outhouses and baths; the former were placed on the upper floors far from the rest of the rooms, while baths were rooms with tubs for bathing.

Maintenance efforts linked private spaces, like the bathroom and kitchen, with the rest of the metropolis. Water, electricity, and telecommunications are services that form a territory over the territory and connect homes and buildings with one another.

Hygiene combined personal cleanliness with large hospitals and public health policies. This extension allowed habits to be managed as another form of governance. Order would allow policymakers to make uniform decisions about a larger population in a shorter time. Order is the prerequisite for control.

This reordering included a change in the thinking of the city's inhabitants. Public space began to be seen as a necessary condition for private space and, at that point, urban services began to be a decisive factor in property values. Already hygiene was linked to medical and military logic and its strategies dominated urban planning.

The changes that shaped the modern city included many other theories beyond social hygiene, and according to the ideas of the Enlightenment, a clean city was also a beautiful city. In fact, it was in that period that Mexico was named the City of Palaces and people began to feel repugnance toward their own collection of feces, urine, blood, and other fluids. For Mexico to be spectacular, it was necessary to hide its waste, dispose of its garbage, and eliminate its foul odors.

The modern city installed its taste, its light fixtures, asepsis, and cobblestone streets, its government of sewers and drainpipes, over a larger, chaotic city. That other city

continues to multiply in the incessant hum of activity, cultivates popular culture, and finds ways to survive.

That city lacked running water; in its slums and neighborhoods, a wagon still collected its human waste, hauling it away to hide on the outskirts. The social hygiene plan imposed its aesthetic and its morality, but forgot to urbanize, to construct its project, in that other city without palaces and with no court.

Today, the fantasy of the city crumbles at every turn. The urban scenery is as thick as a layer of dust. You need only cast your gaze about to find what social hygiene considers imperfect, ugly, and dirty. Crushed soda cans, used pieces of chewing gum, potholes, and cracks in the pavement are the rubble making the way to the other city, where the multitudes in charge of maintenance prepare to make their entrance.

When I see cleaning crews at work, I observe that social hygiene has failed as an ideal to extend health to all. Urban maintenance personnel lack decent working conditions; however, their work is what dignifies our lives. To date, some 50 of them have lost their lives to COVID-19.

The patterns of our production, consumption, and waste give rhythm, shape, and flow to our communal existence. The city is a hub where increasing population density accelerates exchanges and the production of garbage. However, society places greater value on producing and consuming goods than on disposing of them.

Day after day the cry is heard: "We buy mattresses, bed frames, refrigerators, washing machines, microwave ovens, or any scrap metal you want to sell." In Spanish, the spectral recording uses the impersonal voice of "se,"—these items are bought, "we" don't buy them—, reminiscent of the waste wagon of colonial times. It is broadcast by a loudspeaker in the voice of those who recycle scrap. You see them only if you have something to sell.

When the day's collecting ends, the cleaning of the whole scenery begins. On the dark side of the day, by law the night shift starts at 10 p.m., an hour defined based on biological time. Night workers contradict their own circadian rhythm; their bodies release more of the stress hor-

mone cortisol, altering their blood pressure, and are forced to change their digestive habits; they sleep much less, either because they go against their natural cycles or because they work a second job by day.

On this stage without an audience appeared the first workers of the night, the night watchmen. They were responsible for regulating street lighting, and their position as guardians of the light also made them police-like figures, linking their work to cleanliness, order, and control.

In the lamplit gloom, a labyrinthine roster of trades before dawn unfurled. Street sweepers, gardeners, cleaners of street furniture, watchmen, restorers, laborers . . . sleepless people, because if they dreamed, the city would fall to pieces.

Underpaid and laboring in unsafe conditions, hundreds of workers wield brooms and hoses, drive tank trucks with chemicals, suit up in coveralls, or prepare paint and mortar to restore historic buildings. Plastic barriers and cordons of reflective tape go up in the streets, workers tear up the asphalt carpet while others lay new asphalt or pour cement to pave the sidewalks. It hardly matters that somewhere a dog immortalizes its footprints, because they will do it all over again anyhow. Their job is to erase the passing of time from the streets and bring them back to the present; and the work never ends.

The time for cleaning and maintenance contrasts with the time for production, which is why it is usually done at night. The city that makes and spends money should not be interrupted. That city forgets that the city of maintenance has been scrubbing and repairing until sunrise.

In the historic downtown, 200 people are in charge of sweeping, applying high pressure water spray, watering plants, and removing graffiti after protests. How must it feel to scrub "killer government" off marble hundreds of years old?

It is thanks to its maintenance workers that Mexico City functions, but they do not even receive a decent wage and benefits. On the contrary, social hygiene has seen to it to classify its workers below the threshold of decency, the poverty line; they clean and maintain a city they are unable to enjoy. Today, maintenance workers toil through the wee hours, underpaid and underappreciated, resisting a pandemic.

Early, as denizens of the daylight stumble about finding our coffee makers, the multitudes of maintenance workers migrate back to the city's outskirts. **NMM**

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