Nudity and disorder : Adventures in posthumanist freedom

NUDITY AND DISORDER:
ADVENTURES IN POSTHUMANIST FREEDOM

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Abstract

This work is my autoethnographic meditation on ideas of freedom and critique – on the freedom to think differently, question the obviousness of the existing order, refuse to conform to societal standards, and explore practices which may seem 'unthinkable' from a normalized standpoint within Western society. In a world where everyone seems to think and act alike, what happens when I choose my own ethical practice of freedom? Am I free to experiment with difference within my conformist society and challenge the obviousness of the existing order of things?

To address these questions, I recount my adventures disobeying the 'obvious' prohibition of public nudity underlying modern Western humanism. I reflect on what happened to me when I sought to embrace my naked body in contexts where this was 'inappropriate' or 'unthinkable': such as in my graduate seminars or in the streets of London.

Relying on the legality of public nudity in England, I explore the range of affective responses I experienced in various locations and social situations. I examine these reactions in ongoing interdisciplinary conversations with philosophers, sociologists, and psychologists. I tell stories of fear, rage, panic, and shame. The stories, in their essential similarities, suggest a meaningful picture of society's resistance against attempts to cross the limits that protect its order.

My adventures in attempting to introduce my naked body into the everyday, clothed, 'human' world I exist in have allowed me to cross those limits and to experience what lies 'beyond'. From that perspective, I observed the arbitrariness of the existing order. At the same time, however, the visceral, violent reactions I suffered from the self-appointed defenders of the order indicate that, even in the 'free' West, religious and ideological freedom comes at a price I am not sure I am willing to pay.

To my dad

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And to my daughter Luna, who gave me the strength to keep going.

Preface

I preface my work with this autobiographical note because I want to be explicit about the standpoint from which I write. I understand that my perspective and view of the world, especially of 21st century London, may differ from that of many of you readers, who have had different experiences. So, given that I am writing from a particular perspective that may seem strange to many of you, I use these prefatory remarks to introduce you to my standpoint.

As I write in the Introduction below, this work is my own meditation on ideas of freedom and critique – on the freedom to think differently, question the obviousness of the existing order, refuse to conform to societal standards, and explore practices that may seem unthinkable from a normal (or *normalized*) perspective within Western societies. This is a deeply autobiographical work, made possible because I came to feel like a complete outsider in my own society. I became *completely* disillusioned with the values and beliefs of the people I share the world with, with the shared understanding that holds society together – let's call it ideology, religion, order of things. That force that binds and bonds people together stopped working on me. I started seeing my society from an outsider's perspective. I felt like I had been abandoned by my society, and I sought to embrace my new status as an outcast.

On the one hand, in some sense at least, I became freer to think differently and critically. On the other hand, however, this freedom to think differently and critically only made me more aware of the unfreedom that comes from *still* having to adhere, in my everyday life, to societal norms that I have no respect for. I found myself at the mercy of a law that was not 'mine' – bound by the terms of a social contract I had never agreed to and I did not want to be a part of. I started to feel like a prisoner of my society's absurd religious practices.

The event that turned me into an outcast happened when Barclays Bank (my first employer after my undergraduate degree) and the UK judiciary invented a crime, accused me of having committed it, and incarcerated me for two years. The entire story did not (and does not) make any sense – yet suddenly, I found myself rejected by the society I thought I belonged to. Everyone turned against me: not just prosecutors and judges but also jurors, journalists, members of the public commenting on newspaper articles, my therapist, friends, and even my family. I felt abandoned, powerless against the self-righteous arrogance of people who knew nothing about my alleged crime but readily believed the narrative spread by the media. I became an outcast – and I remained one even after my release from prison. Below, I tell the story of how I became a criminal, because this work would not make sense without this premise.

1. Becoming a criminal

Allegedly, I am one of the bank traders who conspired to manipulate 'Euribor', an index of Euro-denominated interest rates, in the years leading up to the financial crisis of 2008. After my degree in economics, my first job was at Barclays Bank, in London. Years later, dissatisfied and unhappy with my banking job, I went back to studying – I did an MA in psychosocial studies at Birkbeck, University of London, and then started a PhD in philosophy at the University of California, Riverside. Then, the UK criminally charged me with having 'conspired to manipulate' Euro-denominated interest rates between 2005 and 2009.

In his book *Rigged. The Incredible True Story of the Whistleblowers Jailed after Exposing the Rotten Heart of the Financial System* (2023), BBC Economics Correspondent Andy Verity tells the story of my conviction and that of the other 'co-conspirators' who were charged and convicted with me. It is the story of a society wanting scapegoats to punish for the financial crisis that hit the economy, and of the UK Serious Fraud Office[1] desperate to avoid their planned demise by jailing some (*any*) bankers for 'their role in the financial crisis'. It is also the story of shady collusion between those at the top of the UK financial

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[1] The Serious Fraud Office (SFO) is the UK government agency charged with prosecuting financial crime.

system (Barclays, the Bank of England, the Financial Conduct Authority) and the UK judiciary to identify and punish some useful scapegoats in order to shield the British financial establishment from scrutiny – and of how Barclays offered its internal whistleblowers to the UK government as scapegoats. Ultimately, it is the story of a witch-hunt that saw clueless politicians, careless journalists, dishonest judges, gullible jurors, and the public opinion unite to ensure that the whistleblowers and scapegoats Barclays had offered to the government be publicly punished to quell the public's thirst for bankers' blood.

None of us bankers convicted of interest rate manipulation had done anything prohibited or 'wrong', nor had we even *attempted* to manipulate anything. Yet this did not prevent the UK judiciary from prosecuting and incarcerating us – as they say, where there is a will, there is a way. Many believe that in today's UK one cannot be criminally charged, convicted, or imprisoned without evidence and a fair trial. Based on my experience, I must say the reality is quite different.

Back in 2015, I was initially charged with a mysterious, nonsensical, and unfounded accusation of 'market manipulation'. Interestingly, the 'law' I was alleged to have violated was only concocted by my prosecutors and by my trial judge Michael Gledhill in late 2017, just before our trial was set to commence.

The judge's retrospective invention of the 'law' I had supposedly 'conspired to breach' exposes the dishonesty of both the prosecutors and the judge. It is a little technical, but I will try to explain it. Daily, banks submit estimates of market interest rates, and a trimmed average of these submissions is used to calculate the Euribor index. This process is governed by a private Code of Conduct set up by the submitting banks. Judge Gledhill ruled that this Euribor Code of Conduct contained an *implicit* (but, according to him, '*self-evident*') prohibition on considering the commercial interests of banks when choosing the interest rate to be submitted for the calculation of the Euribor index. He also ruled that this alleged implicit prohibition had 'always' existed and was akin to a law. Thus, Judge Gledhill could use violations of this alleged, never-heard-before retrospective prohibition, which he had implied into a private Code of Conduct, as grounds to imprison people in England.

During my time at Barclays, I worked for the team of traders dealing in Euro interest rates. As part of my administrative duties as a junior team member, I occasionally sent emails to colleagues who submitted Euribor interest rates, sharing the commercial interests of my team. This was sufficient 'evidence' to charge me with participation in a 'conspiracy' to 'manipulate' interest rates in breach the Euribor Code of Conduct.

The *entire* committee responsible for drafting and implementing the Euribor Code of Conduct, the European Banking Federation overseeing it, all European countries, and numerous others, all disagreed with the English judge's claim that I had breached an 'implicit' provision of the Euribor Code of Conduct. The authors of the Code wrote open letters to the press stating that Judge Gledhill had invented non-existing rules and given them retroactive force in English law. They stated unequivocally that I had not acted improperly. But Judge Gledhill dismissed their opinions: once inside an English courtroom, truth and reality no longer mattered anymore.

It was the beginning of two Kafkaesque trials. The charges made no sense, but the prosecution's case was put in sensationalistic and highly emotional terms: I had been part of a 'gang of greedy bankers', who had 'tried to rig key lending rate linked to 350 trillion of financial products'[2]. The judge told the jury to ignore the technicalities and think about the people who had lost their homes and savings in the financial crisis. The press went along and pushed the narrative that we had manipulated trillions of interest rates – probably also causing the rise in mortgage rates. After a first trial where the jurors remained unconvinced, the prosecutors ordered a re-trial with a new jury. This time, judge Gledhill cobbled together a very young and impressionable jury – including even a teenager[3](!) – whom he could eventually persuade to convict me.

I was given a four-year sentence. I spent two years in prison, mostly in a medium-high security prison. I shared a cell of 2m by 3m with people of all sorts ('criminals') and was

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[2] https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-6595263/Gang-greedy-bankers-cheated-like-Australian-cricketers.html
[3] The trial had to be paused to allow her to attend university admission interviews.

subject to constant and unspeakable abuse by prison officers. I missed the birth of my daughter.

Since my release in 2021, I have been subject to various degrees of restrictions of movement and police control (for reasons of 'public protection'). My criminal conviction means I am effectively a second-tier citizen: there are many things I am not allowed to do (I am not eligible for most jobs, I cannot have normal bank accounts, credit cards, or mortgages. I cannot have insurance policies: hence I cannot even drive a car, etc.). My 'immorality' means I am now forever banned from entering the U.S., where my brother and his family live, and where I still have the home where I used to live before my trials and incarceration.

I have been fighting a strenuous legal battle to clear my name, against a UK judiciary determined to protect itself at all costs. Eventually, in 2023, the Criminal Case Review Commission – the body tasked with correcting miscarriages of justice in the UK – asked the courts to review my conviction, believing it was a miscarriage of justice. Senior politicians raised concerns, too: Labour's John McDonnell called my conviction 'a massive miscarriage of justice', and Conservative David Davies called it 'the deepest miscarriage of justice' the UK has ever seen[4]. But the UK judiciary has been refusing to listen; all appeals have been dismissed[5].

2. A first-person experience of a witch-hunt

Above, I told the story of my ordeal in the English criminal justice system in some detail because I feel it is important to understand the emotional perspective from which I write this work. My struggle for justice has cost me the past decade of my life, my mental health, many human relationships (including, *especially*, with my parents), and a gigantic amount of

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[4] See https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/business-68563091,
https://www.lemonde.fr/en/economy/article/2024/03/20/libor-trial-the-relentless-prosecution-of-former-london-traders_6635982_19.html, and also https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/appeal-courts-rate-rigging-ruling-misguided-and-incorrect-say-euribor-founders-ldw0hqk0h
[5] Usually, without even engaging with the many issues raised.

money. It has cost me my (imaginary, but still…) relationship with the broader society in which I exist.

The hardest part was realizing that nobody really believed in my innocence. People often assume that if someone is convicted on a crime and jailed, they must have done *something* wrong. The media campaign against 'greedy and dishonest' bank traders who had 'manipulated' Euribor and Libor interest rates only reinforced this and fuelled people's anger towards banks and bankers. Mortgage holders who saw their monthly payments rise during the crisis easily blamed 'greedy, dishonest bankers'. A false narrative about interest rate manipulation, which likely stemmed from misunderstandings by US authorities (Verity, 2023), opportunistic politicians, and sensationalized press releases by prosecutors, grew into the widely-accepted 'truth' that traders had manipulated interest rates during the financial crisis. As the press endorsed this narrative, *no one*, not even my friends and family, doubted it.

The press played a significant role in constructing and spreading the narrative of my interest rate 'manipulation'. At the time, ten years ago, I was naïve about how the press operates. I was unaware of the close relationship between prosecutors and the press, as well as between the financial press and the banks[6]. I was unprepared for the onslaught of press articles supporting the prosecution's allegations of my 'manipulation' of global interest rates and its alleged impact on 'hundreds of trillions of financial products'. The consistent messaging across different newspapers lent credibility to the narrative. Readers' comments were also unpleasant, with many expressing their anger towards me. To many, my trial and conviction signified 'justice' being served against 'the bankers'.

Most people who knew me assumed that I had been made a scapegoat for my managers. They reasoned that while the bank I worked for was 'surely' guilty of market manipulation, I couldn't have been the one ordering it – I must have been following instructions. The idea that guilty corporate managers would use junior employees as scapegoats to protect themselves is easily accepted by many, as it fits their worldview. However, very few could

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[6] Banks are the main source of advertising revenue for the financial press.

believe that no manipulation had occurred at all – that I was *not* involved in *any* wrongdoing *whatsoever*. It's difficult to believe that a banker could be imprisoned based on a few innocent administrative work emails, which a judge, a decade later, deems as retrospectively prohibited and criminal. Even some journalists hesitated to tell the real story, thinking it was too absurd for their audience to believe. People do not believe narratives that challenge their established views.

In the social circles I belong to, particularly in leftist and academic circles, where people are generally aware of structural biases in the justice system, many assume that injustice only occurs to individuals from marginalized groups. It is difficult for most to believe that a white middle-class banker could be criminally charged and convicted unless he has done *something* wrong. What happened to me did not fit into their neat understanding of the world, so they could not believe it.

Even among my closest friends and family, many did not believe that I would have been jailed if I had not been involved, to *some* extent, in something illegal. As my aunt bluntly told me, 'You would not have been convicted if you had been *completely* innocent'. As a testament to the media's power in shaping the 'truth', my parents only started to consider the possibility that I may in fact have been innocent only when a documentary on my story was broadcasted on Italian State television[7].

And so, I found myself isolated, criminalized by everyone, abandoned by society, only seen through the lens of false, fabricated narratives. I felt like I existed in a parallel universe, separate from the most people around me. I began to see myself as a complete outsider.

3. My perspective and state of mind

This project originates directly from the feelings of isolation, loneliness, distrust, and anger – and probably a lot more, and more than I am even aware of – that I have been experiencing as

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[7] https://www.raiplay.it/video/2024/04/Spotlight-Euribor-la-grande-manipolazione-Da-Londra-alla-Corte-di-Cassazione--c7d87941-9906-4a41-9cce-8d058cc561d0.html?wt_mc=2.www.wzp.raiplay_vid_Spotlight

a result of what I described above. This experience of being separated from society opened up a space for me think critically. The experience of prison – of *surviving* prison – made me less fearful of the law and, perhaps paradoxically, less afraid of the police[8]. I was also – and still am – filled with rage, which drives my struggle against the established order. This rage runs throughout this project and this text; I have tried my best to tone it down, to sublimate it, but it remains present. My anger at being criminalized by the UK judiciary and society naturally spilled over and coloured my emotional response to society's criminalization of my naked body, leading me to reflect on the similarities between these two phenomena.

This project is also an attempt to reflect on the psychosocial dynamics and operations of power that make society single out some individuals or groupd and then use them as targets for their anger and violence. In courtrooms and in the arena of public opinion, I have witnessed people eagerly unleashing their anger, hatred, and violence against whomever they felt allowed to use as a target – in other words, against available scapegoats. I will never forget the feeling of power on the faces of my jurors when they were about to convict me. It makes me wonder if something similar happens with the exclusion of my naked body, which, like the accused in the dock, has been excluded by the community, physically set apart, criminalized – and thus made available as a target for people's anger, hatred, and violence to be lawfully unleashed upon it.

Finally, I want to address some criticisms that I anticipate receiving. One possible criticism is that this project is deeply individualistic and lacks a sense of collective action. This is obviously true. While the exploration of greater metaphysical freedom that I seek to undertake has the potential to benefit everyone, it is evident that this project begins as – and perhaps remains – an individual endeavour. This perspective reflects my current belief in the oppressive nature of society and community. Although my experiences suggest that individual freedom may ultimately be undesirable (*too* painful, both emotionally and physically), the very notion of collective emancipation (in the posthumanist sense that I discuss below) seems *completely* inconceivable and internally contradictory to me.

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[8] This is not because prison is nice or because the police are trustworthy, but rather because we tend to be afraid of the unknown (Jeffers, 2012). Known things, which we have already gone through and overcome, tend to be less scary.

Another valid criticism that I want to address is that my exploration of metaphysical freedom within – but largely *against* – my society presupposes the privileged standpoint of someone who does not rely on the support of society and feels safe enough as an outsider to not conform. Once again, I agree with this assessment. Generally, adhering to societal norms and conforming to our peers is essential to feel secure, protected from violence, and enjoy the benefits of belonging. The rebellion that I propose in this project presupposes that one is willing to undertake the risks associated with non-conforming. This often indicates a position of privilege.

However, in a world where billions of people say, do, and write (more or less) the same things, there may *also* be value in listening to those who, *for whatever* reasons – including privilege – are willing to be different.

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Introduction: situating this project

The only adventure, we said, is to contest the totality, whose centre is this way of living, where we can test our strength but never use it. No adventure is directly created for us. The adventures that are presented to us form part of the mass of legends transmitted by the cinema or in other ways; part of the whole spectacular sham of history.

(Debord, Critique of Separation, 1961)

Introduction – Freedom from ideology, or 'posthumanist freedom'

This work explores ideas of freedom and critique – the freedom to think differently, challenge societal norms, and question the existing order. It asks whether individuals can choose their own ethical practices rather than blindly following inherited ones. What happens when individuals reject dominant norms and embrace difference – in both thought and action? This is my own inquiry into resisting the totality; my personal 'adventures in posthumanist freedom'.

To frame this conceptual problem, I'll begin with a parable from David Foster Wallace's commencement speech at Kenyon College in 2005:

> Two fish are swimming along in the ocean when they pass an older fish swimming the other way. The older fish says, 'Morning, how's the water?' The two fish swim on silently and after a while one says to the other, 'What is 'water'?

When we're deeply immersed in a particular way of life, it becomes hard to recognize it as just one of many possible worlds. We tend to assume that our ways of constructing meaning

and order are universal, unquestionable – even 'natural'. The societal norms we follow, and the discourses that sustain them, often seem self-evidently 'true', 'good', or 'right'. But these norms are contingent, not necessary. In daily life, conformity and obedience can become so habitual that they disappear from view; they feel obvious, unquestionable. From within the ordered totality we inhabit, it's hard – perhaps impossible – to see anything beyond it.

The invisibility of mass compliance and the apparent 'obviousness' with the established order shape how we perceive both freedom and the potential for critique. If we cannot imagine anything outside the ideological totality in which we live, then 'freedom' is reduced to choosing among options already sanctioned by that totality. Consequently, even radical-sounding critique often targets marginal aspects of the system, seeking improvements that leave its fundamental structure untouched.

In contrast, I begin with the premise that our existing order is arbitrary and contingent, and that its seeming necessity is an ideological effect. From this standpoint, I ask whether something radically different – something 'unthinkable' or seemingly 'impossible' from our current position – might nonetheless be possible.

This work explores the freedom to transcend the limits of our ordered existence and to investigate what lies beyond. In Chapter 1, I call this 'posthumanist freedom'. The central question guiding this inquiry is: Can we venture beyond the boundaries of our ideological totality? And if not, what holds us back? What keeps us attached to the existing order, unable to imagine or explore a radically different way of being?

This question is of critical importance to radical thought and to critical academia. It strikes at the heart of whether true critique of the totality is even possible. Must we finally accept that 'critique' can only happen within boundaries already permitted by the system – as is often the case in universities and mainstream leftist spaces? If so, perhaps what we call 'critique' is ultimately a kind of containment – and genuine, transformative critique may be impossible.

1. Situating this project: between philosophy, art, and politics

The project of questioning the established order – of seeking radically different alternatives – has long preoccupied philosophers, political theorists, activists, and radical artistic movements. In particular, the ideal of disrupting the order *of everyday life* – introducing disorder, experimenting with previously unthinkable possibilities, and reaching towards the 'impossible' – resonated deeply with countercultural movements of the 1960s and 1970s, especially in France. In Paris, *mai* 1968 remains associated with the Situationist-inspired slogan '*Soyons réalistes, demandons l'impossible*'[9].

And yet, despite the events of 1968, the world's fundamental order remained intact. Whatever disruptions occurred, the ideological totality quickly reasserted itself. The established order was restored. Short skirts became permitted – only for women, anyway – and men could grow their hair long; but this is hardly a revolution.

In this work, I return to the radical dream of experimenting with new ways of being. Rather than placing hope in large-scale cultural revolutions, I focus on my own world -- exploring what happens when I attempt to embrace radical difference and non-conformity in my everyday life. I investigate the feasibility of rejecting the 'obvious' norms that structure social life. Along the way, I examine both my own and others' attachment to the existing order.

To experiment with rejecting this everyday order, I play with one of the most deeply rooted and virtually unchallenged norm of the modern Western world: the prohibition of public nudity. As I explore in Chapters 2 and 3, public clothedness is a fundamental social norm – so deeply ingrained that it appears obvious, unproblematic, and even morally 'right' to most. It is so taken for granted that it remains almost entirely unchallenged in both mainstream or academic discourses.

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[9] 'Be realistic, demand the impossible'.

But this is *not* a study of nudity. I am interested in nudity only because of its foundational role in the current ideological order. I focus on because its prohibition seems too fundamental to even be questioned (see Chapter 2), and because I see nudity as the original taboo on which the humanist/Christian world is built (see Chapter 3) – not because of nudity itself. If the foundational taboo were about bananas, I would work with bananas. What I say about nudity in Chapters 2 and 3 is intended to support a broader argument: that nudity occupies a central place in our ideological structure, and thus offers a powerful entry point for thinking about the possibility of critiquing ideology.

Following my experiments with defying the nudity taboo, I suggest that the ideological order and its social norms are not simply enforced by culture or institutions, but rooted in embodied, affective – hence ultimately physiological – mechanisms: *shame*. Shame is what keeps us attached to the ways of thinking and acting that define our social groups. Radical difference, however appealing in theory, is practically impossible because it would require deactivating the physiological mechanisms that make us pack animals. However much we might believe in human exceptionalism or free will, we remain pack animals – and our bodily mechanisms reflect that. My concluding suggestion is that non-conformity is not ultimately repressed by the State or its institutions, but by the human physiology of shame. While individuals may be capable of relaxing some of their shame responses, at a collective level, the repression of difference is inescapable.

In this Introduction, I begin by situating my work and identifying the ways it departs from others. At its core, this is a philosophical project, rooted in the tradition of critical social theory that emerged from the Enlightenment and developed through 19th-century German philosophy and French postwar thought (sections 2-4). But rather than discussing philosophical ideas abstractly – debating logical inconsistencies, or weighing commentators' views – I aim to apply them in practice, to see what happens when these ideas are lived[10]. The point is *praxis* itself, inseparable from the thinking – not an abstract 'philosophy of praxis'.

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[10] However uncommon this approach may be in contemporary academia, I believe this is the best way to engage with philosophical ideas.

In this sense, this project shares much with the work of avant-gardes of the 1960s – especially the Situationist International (sections 5-6). And yet, I want to distinguish this work from art. I reject art's structural separation from ordinary life (section 7). However much avant-garde artists have tried to blur the boundary between art and life, their work remains situated within the frame of art. For that reason, this work is *not art*: it is an experiment in rejecting ideological norms as a lived, everyday practice.

This work is also not political activism, or 'agit-prop'. I do not aim to change anyone else's world, nor to educate or mobilize the public, nor to 'disrupt ideology' (sections 8-9). I only explore whether I, *individually*, can refuse the ideological order and live differently – in ways that may seem inconceivable from within the existing structure of meaning. Art is valuable because it allows us to imagine new possibilities (section 10), but the crucial question is whether those possibilities can be realized in real life.

So, this work is not art, nor is it activism. It is a lived experiment in testing philosophical ideas – ideas often discussed in abstract, distanced ways. It is unconventional, and sits awkwardly across academic disciplines: philosophy, sociology, psychology – and non-academic spaces like art, literature, and politics. This radical interdisciplinarity may feel uncomfortable, and the result may seem unpolished – but this reflects a deliberate refusal to conform to academic conventions. I invite readers to resist categorizing this work into fixed boxes. Genuinely critical thinking is only possible outside the confines of disciplines – which limit not only *what* can be said but also *how* it must be said – and in doing so, foreclose the very space where something truly new and interesting might happen.

2. Questioning the order of things: from Kant to Hegelian and post-Kantian critical thought

In European philosophy, the critical examination of the established order came to prominence during the Enlightenment. What had long been described as 'natural', 'divine', necessary, and unquestionable, began to appear contingent, man-made, and open to critique. The freedom to question societal norms became central to the project of building a better society.

These ideas are particularly central to the work of Kant. With his 'Copernican revolution', argues that the order and regularity we perceive in the world is a social construct:

> 'The order and the regularity in the appearances which we call *nature* are carried into them by ourselves; indeed, we could never find them in nature, if we ourselves, or the nature of our mind, had not originally placed them there' (*Critique of Pure Reason*, A125).

For Kant, critique begins by recognizing that our ordered world is human-made. The orderliness of our knowledge and experience reflects the *a priori*, metaphysical categories that structured it. It is not inherently 'natural', God-given, or necessary. As he argues in the *Critique of Pure Reason*, the metaphysical order of our world (its conceptual schema, our 'pure reason') is a social construct, rooted in our material practices, moral values, and everyday customs: in what he calls our 'practical reason'. The systems of ideas through which we order and understand the world are inseparable from the social practices and way of life which our theoretical understanding of the world both enables and legitimizes. Concepts and practices are two sides of the same coin (*Critique of Practical Reason*, 5:91).

Anticipating a well-known Marxist argument, Kant suggests that our practices shape the conceptual frameworks we adopt, which in turn justify and reproduce those same practices – a dynamic he calls this the 'primacy of practical reason' (*Critique of Pure Reason*: Bxxvi, B823/A795, *Critique of Practical Reason*, 5:91). While he stops short of urging a critique of the practical or conceptual order of the world, in *What is Enlightenment?* (2007), Kant urges his readers to think independently and freely.

The nature of the conceptual/symbolic order of our world if further explored by Hegel (1977), who focusses on the impossibility for any ordered system of ideas to fully comprehend the world it seeks to describe. Ideological orders attempt to construct totalities, but because no such system can wholly capture reality, these totalities are always fragile – exposed to critique, and eventually replaced. All configurations of order are partial, historical, and contingent.

The Kantian notion of the primacy of practical reason – that our metaphysical/ideological order is grounded in the needs of practical life – remains central to later post-Kantian and post-Hegelian critical social thought, from Feuerbach (1972, 1989) to Marx and Engels (1974a, 1974b), Cassirer (1965), and later structuralism. As these thinkers recognized the historical and contingent nature of social practices, they also came to see the ideological order itself as contingent – and began to ask how it might be changed. As Marx famously put it in his eleventh thesis on Feuerbach:

> 'The philosophers have only interpreted the world, in various ways; the point is to change it.' (1974b)

But how can the world – the system of ideas through which we order and organize our lives – be changed? In the opening paragraph of *The German Ideology*, Marx and Engels mock the 'Young Hegelians' – especially Feuerbach, Bauer, and Stirner – for believing that people can free themselves from ideology simply by recognizing its nature:

> 'Let us teach men, says one, to exchange these imaginations for thoughts which correspond to the essence of man; says the second, to take up a critical attitude to them; says the third, to knock them out of their heads; and – existing reality will collapse.' (1974a: 37)

Marx and Engels argue that ideological beliefs cannot be undone by abstract criticism alone, because they are rooted in the material conditions of life. While this focus on the material conditions is significant, it opens space for disagreement about what those conditions actually are – and what protects ideological beliefs from being challenged.

3. Marxism on individual freedom from ideology

In this work, I ask whether – or to what extent –I have the freedom in my everyday daily life to think and act differently from what is considered normal within the ideological order I inhabit. Broadly speaking, classical Marxist critique has little interest in this question. It does

not prioritize the possibility of individual ideological freedom in an unfree world, aiming instead at collective, structural transformation.

Marxist analysis views ideology as deeply embedded in economic and social structures, shaping consciousness at a fundamental level. From this perspective, freedom from ideology is not achievable at an individual level, but only through broader material and collective change. From a classical Marxist perspective, the idea of an individual breaking free from ideology while the system remains intact is largely illusory. True freedom ('liberation') is understood not as an individual act of nonconformity or disobedience, but as a collective process of social transformation.

Even Marxist thinkers who allow for some individual autonomy – Gramsci (1999), in particular – do so only in the context of revolutionary strategy. His concept of the 'organic intellectual' focusses on individuals who work to destabilize the cultural hegemony of dominant ideology in order to replace it with an alternative. The aim remains a shift in ideological totality, not the cultivation of individual 'posthumanist' freedom within it.

Later Marxist thinkers address the tension between individual and collective freedom in different ways. Writers from the Frankfurt School examine how ideology operates in everyday life. Adorno (2001) and Marcuse (1991) suggest that modern capitalist societies integrate individuals so thoroughly into ideological systems that even apparent acts of resistance are not in fact challenges to the system. If breaks from ideology are possible, they must come from collective movements – not isolated acts of defiance.

Althusser (1994) takes this further, arguing that ideology doesn't just influence individuals – it produces them as subjects. This makes the idea of individual ideological freedom within an unfree system not only difficult, but almost impossible to conceive. He also argues that people are affectively invested in their ideological relationship to society, implying that critique cannot succeed unless it addresses the unconscious level at which ideology truly operates. This argument is developed by Žižek (2008), who observes that individuals often enjoy their ideological submission, reinforcing the very systems they believe they are resisting.

The Marxist critique of ideology raises important questions. If ideology functions as a collective system, what meaning or value can individual freedom from it have? Why should we care about such freedom – and is it even possible? Could the pursuit of individual freedom be a way of avoiding deeper systemic change?

In this work, I adopt a different perspective – one grounded in a deep pessimism about the possibility of collective 'liberation'. Instead, I explore whether *individual freedom from ideology* might still be a meaningful, if limited, alternative.

4. Beyond 'collective liberation': Stirner, Nietzsche, Foucault

Whereas Marxist critique tends to focus on collective liberation through structural transformation, writers such as Stirner, Nietzsche, and Foucault reject the very idea of freedom as collective 'liberation'. For them, rather than waiting for some shared emancipatory event – which often ends up replacing one ideological order with another – freedom must be conceived as something radically different: a break with ideological normality that does not require the approval of others, and which is not 'liberation' in the usual sense.

In *The Ego and Its Own* (1995), Max Stirner rejects the idea that freedom can arise from collective movements. Such movements, he argues, inevitably demand submission to a new ideological authority – making them just as oppressive as the religious or moral systems they claim to overthrow. Nietzsche deepens this critique by exposing the psychological and power-driven motives behind collective movements (GM I). He suggests that even those who claim to 'liberate' others are in fact motivated by the will to increase their own power (BGE 259).

Building on Nietzsche and writing with the hindsight of the twentieth century, Foucault also rejects the idea of 'collective liberation'. Power, he argues, is everywhere – it does not simply disappear when one system of domination is overturned (1998a). Not only does the collapse

of one regime clear the way for another, but 'emancipatory' movements themselves are inevitably riddled with internal power struggles.

Beyond critiquing the collective dimension of Marxist liberation, Foucault also challenges the very notion of 'liberation' itself. The concept of liberation assumes the prior existence of a subject – or 'thing' – to be 'liberated' from external oppression or repression. But this doesn't hold: the subject is not separated from the power relationships it resists; it is shaped by them. Emancipatory struggles promise the return to some original, authentic freedom – but in fact, they are power games like any other, forming and transforming subjects rather than releasing them into a pre-existing state of freedom.

Foucault's critique of 'liberation' is especially relevant to the ideological critique I explore in this work. As neo-Kantian thinkers like Cassirer (1965) have long argued, the world does not pre-exist the system of ideas and the conceptual schemata we use to understand it. Therefore, there is no way to make sense of the world that is free from ideology. Freedom from ideology, then, cannot be imagined as a return to some unfiltered access to reality.

The kind of freedom I explore in this work – the freedom to think and act differently, to refuse ideological normality – should not be mistaken for some hypothetical freedom to experience the world 'as it truly is'. As Kant notes, we have no access to 'things in themselves', without ideological filters. I agree with Foucault that this common ideal of 'freedom' is itself largely an ideological construct. Instead, developing the Nietzschean ideal of the *Übermensch* (Z) and Foucault's reflection on freedom (see Chapter 1), I suggest that individual freedom may be experienced in moments when we cross the limits of what is 'conceivable' within our ideological environment – when we 'stop making sense' and act outside accepted norms and conceptual frameworks.

In Chapter 1, I define this kind of freedom – which I call 'posthumanist freedom' – to distinguish it both from the liberal tradition (negative and positive freedom) and from ideals of liberation or emancipation. Both of these rely on the humanist assumption of an ontologically prior subject: a subject to be liberated from oppression, or one that knows what it wants independently of its ideological environment.

However, as I discuss at the end of Chapter 1, it remains unclear whether such freedom is even possible – even as a short-lived, individual experience. Nietzsche and Foucault describe it, but in vague and abstract terms. To test whether this ideal of freedom is possible, I move from philosophical speculation to lived experiment.

5. The Situationist International and the revolution in everyday life

The idea of applying critique of ideology to everyday life – to disrupt its ideological normality – was central to the work of *The Situationist International*, a collective of radical avant-garde thinkers who experimented with everyday life as a site of resistance between the late 1950s and the early 1970s. They sought to expose the ideological structure of everyday life by disrupting how people experienced the urban spaces and inhabited 'normal' life. They wanted to show people that radically different ways of experiencing the everyday were possible.

In *The Society of Spectacle* (1994), Situationist founding member Guy Debord argues that power operates primarily not through coercion, but by structuring people's experience of the world through images and representations – making domination appear natural or invisible. Problematizing the separation between reality and its representations, Debord insists that critique cannot remain abstract or intellectual – it must become a practical disruption that shakes people out of their passive compliance with the established order:

> 'The critical concept of the spectacle can also undoubtedly be turned into one more hollow formula of sociological-political rhetoric used to explain and denounce everything in the abstract, thus serving to reinforce the spectacular system. It is obvious that ideas alone cannot lead beyond the existing spectacle; at most, they can lead beyond existing ideas about the spectacle. To actually destroy the society of the spectacle, people must set a practical force into motion.' (Thesis 203)

Similarly, in *The Revolution in Everyday Life* (2017) – the other main Situationist text, alongside *The Society of Spectacle* – Raoul Vaneigem calls for a total transformation of everyday existence, urging resistance through pleasure, play, and radical refusal. Vaneigem's vision of ideological freedom resembles the one I explore in this work. He invites us to reject established ways of making sense of the world – to embrace creativity and play beyond the boundaries of order and separations:

> 'Only play can deconsecrate, open up the possibilities of total freedom. This is the principle of subversion, the freedom to change the sense of everything that serves Power' (2017: 259).

The Situationists called for what post-Situationist philosopher Hakim Bey (1985) later described as 'ontological anarchism', or 'poetic terrorism' – a radical practice aimed not at theoretical analysis but at subverting the ontological order of the everyday life. They experimented with disrupting ideological normality in public space. In the 'psychogeographic counter-mapping' project *The Naked City*, for example, they reimagined how one might navigate urban space (Plant, 1992). Debord and Asger Jorn created an alternative map of Paris based not on streets layouts but on emotional, 'psychogeographic' flows, encouraging people to follow this map rather than the functional organization of the city. Likewise, their *dérive* experiments promoted unstructured, aimless explorations of urban spaces, guided by emotions and curiosity – an attempt to break habitual patterns of movement and disrupt the ideological conditioning of everyday life.

The Situationists also inspired and encouraged the student and worker occupations of universities and factories in 1960s France, framing these actions as ways to subvert the ordinary order of things – to inhabit everyday spaces in previously unthinkable ways. They coined slogans for these occupations, that didn't make political demands but hinted at 'impossible', alternative worlds: 'Never work!', 'Abolish the university', 'Beneath the cobblestones, the beach' (ibid.).

However, the Situationist project arguably failed. Their revolutionary programme aimed to spark a mass experiment in ideological freedom, but their avant-garde subversion never

meaningfully altered mainstream consciousness. Engaging with their ideas required an intellectual awareness beyond the reach of most, and their practices remained largely confined to artistic and theoretical circles. Their experiments, ultimately, stayed within the realm of art – intellectually provocative, but separated from the real lives of most people. In that sense, fascinating but ultimately sterile. In contrast, the explorations I discuss in this work do not aim to reach the masses or remain the realm of art – it is a personal, lived experiment in resisting ideological normality from within.

6. Avant-garde performance art – and its use of nudity

Despite their ultimate failure, the Situationists greatly influenced later projects – especially in performance art and protest tactics. While many of their disruptive experiments were eventually reabsorbed into the very system they critiqued (influencing advertising campaigns, becoming standard formats for student protests, etc.), attempts to subvert the normal order of everyday life have since become common in the performance art scene. Nudity, in particular, became increasingly central to Situationist-inspired avant-garde performances throughout the 1960s and 1970s – as provocation, or as 'liberation'. Many avant-garde artists saw performance art as a means to realize the utopia of freedom envisioned by radical thinkers: a window onto a new world, and a path towards non-violent revolution.

While there are similarities between my work on that of the 1960s and 1970s avant-garde, I want to highlight a fundamental difference. My work is an exploration of whether I can reject the established ideological order in my real life. Unlike avant-garde performance art, it is not art, and I do not seek to convince others or to change their world.

For example, The Living Theatre, led by Judith Molina and Julian Beck, staged interactive, anarchic performances across the US and Europe, directly inspired by Artaud's ideas of freedom (*Signals Through the Flames*, 1983, Felton-Dansky, 2014, Penner, 2009, 2018). Like the Situationists, they sought to break the 'fourth wall' between performers and public, spilling into real life, involving passersby, and disrupting their routine. In *The Rite of Guerrilla Theatre*, part of their most famous work *Paradise Now*, they invited the spectators

to join them on stage and explore new ways of being. They urged audiences to question the normal order of their world: the existence of borders, money, and prohibitions on marijuana psychedelics, and nudity. Using shock tactics, they aimed to politicize their audiences and challenge the status quo.

The Living Theatre frequently performed naked. In their work, nudity functioned both as provocation – against dominant morality, against the State and its repressive apparatuses – and as a symbol of liberation. Nudity represented the freedom towards which anarchic politics aspired: a world beyond repression and prohibition ('paradise'). Like marijuana and psychedelics, nudity was imagined as a way of revealing previously unthinkable experiences –freeing the mind from its normal *a priori* constraints.

However, like the Situationists, The Living Theatre failed to change the world – arguably for the same reasons. Most people didn't understand them or weren't interested. Many were upset. In any case, their work never extended beyond the performance space. It was art – and art it remained. It never became more than that.

In Britain, COUM Transmission were another anarchic performance and music collective that used shock tactics to provoke outrage and challenge mainstream norms around sexuality, gender, and the body. Led by Genesis P-Orridge and Cosey Fanni Tutti, their performances included nudity, sexual acts, and bodily functions (including public peeing; *Other, Like Me*, 2020). They confronted societal taboos in an effort to critique repression and open up new possibilities.

Like The Living Theatre and the Situationists, COUM Transmission sought to change society by performing in public spaces. But again, their work was widely misunderstood, and they failed to shift the public's moral perspective.

Marina Abramovič, also employed Situationist tactics to force the audience to confront their social conditioning – particularly around bodies – through participatory performances. In *Rhythm 0*, she allowed the audience to use objects including scissors, a rose, and a gun on her body. In *Imponderabilia*, she and her partner Ulay stood naked on either side of a doorway,

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forcing visitors to pass between them. Participants were faced with their discomfort and a deeper awareness of the norms that usually render ideological conditioning invisible.

Other artists have similarly used nudity to challenge norms: Carolee Schneemann used her naked body to confront patriarchal structures (e.g. *Interior Scroll*, 1975); punk bands often performed naked; Jim Morrison – allegedly inspired by The Living Theatre[11] – was famously charged with indecent exposure. More recently, Pussy Riot have used nudity in artsy political protests in Russia, and Spencer Tunick has staged large-scale nude installations in public spaces.

Still, doubts remain as to whether such performances produce real change in societal attitudes and morals – or whether they simply become part of the spectacle, however intellectually interesting they may be.

7. Against artistic 'disruption' – for a revolution in real life

The experiments and adventures discussed in this work are not art. I reject the idea that art – due to its inherent separation from everyday life – can help realize the posthumanist freedom envisioned by Nietzsche and Foucault: the freedom of rejecting ideological normality. Debord similarly argued that art is not truly subversive. Art operates in a separate domain – an aesthetic one – and thus cannot disrupt the lived conditions of ideology. It belongs to the spectacle. For Debord, art offers only an illusion of critique (1994, Thesis 185) without real change. In fact, he calls it 'the pure expression of impossible change' (ibid., Thesis 190).

Debord and the Situationists envisioned a revolution in everyday real life, not in art but in praxis: a unification of philosophy, art, and life. Yet their work, like other avant-garde efforts, was eventually institutionalized. As Peter Bürger (1994) observes, these radical practices became part of art history, museum culture, and academic discourse. Perhaps this was inevitable – their work sought to transform the real life of the real people around them, yet

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[11] See Penner, 2018

they lacked the material power to do so. Separated from life, their interventions were something that could only be observed, but not lived – hence to more 'spectacle' (Debord, 1994, Thesis 25). They wanted to create 'real' situations – yet, as most people just watched them from a distance, their 'real-life experiments' ended up functioning like avant-garde art pieces. The public was not ready to 'live differently' and most people didn't understand their 'situations', which they just saw as confusing stunts or provocative performances.

Analogous considerations apply to other avant-garde performance art experiments. Art cannot produce meaningful change if it remains separate from normal life. People watch or participate in an artistic performance, then return to normal life. That separation is both the condition of art's radicality and the limit of its impact. Nudity in art is a good example: it is permitted precisely because it takes place in art – but this exceptionality also neutralizes its subversiveness. As Debord says, it becomes an illusion of critique, not critique. Attempts to bridge the separation between art and life – through street performance or audience participation – fail because art remains art, regardless of location or format. A performance does not become 'life' simply because it occurs in public or briefly involves others. The exceptional status of art allows for transgression, but also tames it.

Like the Situationists, I wanted to explore the possibility of living differently – of rejecting the ideological order of everyday life. But I did not want this to be art. I wanted to introduce disorder into real life. Hence, I reject any association with art. This work explores unthinkable, prohibited possibilities of being within the very domains where they remain excluded.

8. This is not a political project

This work is also not a political project in the conventional sense of the term, insofar as politics exists *within the order*. Political struggles rely on demands and positions being intelligible, which means they must be articulated according to the existing conceptual and metaphysical schemata. This applies equally to supposedly 'radical' and 'revolutionary' demands. A demand that is inconceivable within the existing order cannot be understood by

the public, which will judge it through the dominant ideological framework – and will therefore likely misread it as something 'bad', 'wrong', or 'undesirable'. As I discuss in this work, this is precisely what happened when I attempted to introduce nudity in my everyday public life. There can be no conventional politics when one's demand is to reject everybody else's sense of reality.

This is not to deny that nudity has often been used as a protest tactic by political activists (Mathebula, 2022, Twasiima, 2019, Barcan, 2002, and Car-Gomm, 2013). Political activists have used nudity to draw attention to variety of causes: animal rights (PETA), women's rights (Femen), environmental concerns and cyclists' safety (Extinction Rebellion, World Naked Bike Rides), anti-war protests (Vietnam, Iraq, etc.), and more. However, there is a fundamental difference between how I use nudity in this work and how it is typically used in political protests. While I question the very order and sense of the world – exploring the possibility of *normal* nudity – protesters generally rely on the disruptive power of *exceptional* nudity to highlight causes that remain intelligible within the ideological order.

Political protests, however radical they may appear, do not aim to subvert the metaphysical or conceptual structure of the world. They operate within it. When nudity is used to advance political causes, it is not intended to challenge its exceptional status. On the contrary, protest movements harness nudity *because* of its exceptionalism and shock power. In this sense, political – like nudity in art – is a performance. It remains separate from everyday life. It is an exception, not a transformation.

But even if we abandon conventional political aims, can we still speak of 'disrupting' the ideological order at all?

9. 'Disrupting' the order?

Some readers of earlier drafts have described this project as an experiment in 'disrupting ideology' or 'disrupting the ideological order'. I find such characterizations troubling. Ideology – the system of ideas, beliefs, and values through which individuals understand their

world and which guides their everyday interactions – is the very framework that makes reality intelligible. In this sense, I use 'ideology' and 'religion' interchangeably. We all rely on ideological systems to make sense of the world and to live together with others. Without a shared ideology, our experiences wouldn't be mutually intelligible.

From this perspective, it is not clear what it could mean to 'disrupt ideology' in any meaningful sense. While I may be able to question or interrupt certain aspects of *my own* ideological understanding, how could I disrupt the sense-making structures of others? Any such 'disruption' would always remain – at best – a highly localized event, with no lasting or significant effects on the broader order. It is like trying to make a dent in water: the system reforms before the ripples have settled.

Radical art and political protests often claim to be 'disruptive'. Yet rarely – if ever – do they transform the audience's ideological understanding of the world. Most people remain spectators. As Debord (1994) observes, this makes art part of the spectacle. Similarly, political protests are only 'disruptive' in the narrow sense that they momentarily disrupt daily routines – causing road closures, transports delays, or the temporary shutdown of universities and workplaces. But they do not meaningfully disrupt the ideological framework that underpins those routines.

I did not want to create more spectacle. While I would be pleased if my explorations inspire others in their own radical praxis, I do not believe I can shake anyone from their ideological beliefs – nor do I wish to spend my time trying. And yet, even if art cannot disrupt ideology, might it still help us imagine what life beyond it could look like?

10. Art as a vision of what real life could be

Above, I have questioned the idea that nudity in art is genuinely 'disruptive'. Because art exists in a separate, exceptional domain, it does not – and arguably cannot – unsettle the normal ideological order of things. In performance art, nudity is possible, even expected. In everyday life, it is not. Naked performances have no effect whatsoever on the everyday

prohibition of nudity; the fact that one can be naked in an artwork does nothing to alter the fact that normal nudity remains impossible and inconceivable.

However, this does not mean that art is useless. The very possibility of doing in art what remains prohibited and unthinkable in real life means that art can play a crucial role in imagining alternative worlds. This is especially true in the case of nudity. Like the fishes in Foster Wallace's parable at the start of this Introduction, we cannot grasp the contingent, ideological nature of the normal order unless we step outside it – or at least imagine doing so. Philosopher and naturalist Henry David Thoreau suggests that one way to perceive the strangeness of modern Western clothedness is to view it from the perspective of extraterrestrial visitors (2011: 415). Art offers a sanctioned space in which such perspectives can be playfully or seriously explored.

In his *Diary of the Astro-nudes* comic series, Ahmed Raafat – an Egyptian comic book artist based in the UK – imagines two explorers from a parallel Earth where clothes do not exist (Fig. 1). These inter-dimensional visitors crash-land on our Earth and interact with humans while observing, with fascination, our taboos around nudity and the body. While Raafat's work is not disruptive in any literal sense, it offers a vision of what life might look like beyond the limits of our ideological norms.

Fig. 1 Ahmed Raafat's Diary of the Astro-Nudes. Two inter-dimensional explorers land among clothed humans

Fig. 2 Ahmed Raafat's inter-dimensional explorers walk into a human supermarket

What would happen if I were to walk naked into a supermarket, as Raafat's characters do in one strip (Fig. 2)? How would my familiar social spaces respond to my nudity? Could I experience my normal world from an outsider's perspective – like Raafat's or Thoreau's

extra-terrestrial visitors? Would my body be permitted to exist in public, or must such scenarios remain confined to fiction and thought experiments?

Although I did not set out to create art, art has undeniably been a source of inspiration. Making use of the little-known fact that public nudity is legal in England, I began to test the limits of my society's clothed order. I disobeyed the unwritten rules that prohibit nudity and introduced my body into spaces where it is normally excluded or deemed inappropriate. By challenging the established and unquestioned norm of public clothedness, I sought a better understanding of how 'free' I really am. I wanted to learn about the obstacles and problems I would face when stepping outside these norms – and to explore whether it might be possible to develop an ethical practice of freedom grounded in my own values, while still participating in a conformist society. Inspired by artists, I undertook a practical philosophical experiment – not in theory, but in my real, everyday life.

But if art can at least imagine a world beyond our norms, what happens when we turn to academia – where such norms are rarely even questioned?

11. Questioning the prohibition of nudity: a literature review

In the previous sections, I situated my work within a philosophical tradition culminating in the radical ideal of freedom from ideological/metaphysical constraints (as seen in Europe in and around 1968), and in relation to the performance activism that emerged from the same cultural moment. I noted that artists seeking to explore what may become possible beyond the existing ideological totality have often employed nudity in their work, recognizing it as one of the fundamental taboos on which the Western world is built (see Chapter 3). But beyond performance art, can we find any serious academic critiques of the prohibition of nudity?

In short, very little. In academic literature, there is virtually no critical engagement with the norm of public clothedness. The norm is generally seen as so obvious, so unproblematic, or simply 'right' that it remains untouched in mainstream discourse. It is largely absent from critical academic work, and I am not aware of any movement – scholarly or otherwise –

seeking to normalize public nudity. The ideological construction of public nudity as perverse or criminal (see Chapters 2, 5, 6) is enough to deter most academics, who have careers and reputations to protect, from engaging seriously with the subject. I wish I could open this work with a survey of critical literature that challenges the prohibition of our bodies – as one might do when addressing racism, sexism, or capitalism – but no such body of literature exists.

Perhaps, the most sustained critique of the norm of public clothedness remains in *Juliette*, by the Marquis de Sade (1968). Published in 1797, *Juliette* was globally banned well into the 20th century – France only allowed its publication in 1968, the UK in 1983. Writing within an ideological context that framed public nudity as both inconceivable and criminal, Sade's critique was unsurprisingly relegated to the margins and largely ignored. Authors who dare to question the clothed order typically do so only in passing – Thoreau (2011: 451), for instance, offers a moment of reflection, but not much more. To my knowledge, the only academic work that explicitly challenges the obligation to wear clothes in public is the recent *Naked Feminism: Breaking the Cult of Female Modesty* (2023), by economist Victoria Bateman.

Giorgio Agamben (2011b, 2015) is one of the few theorists to reflect on the prohibition of nudity from a critical angle, although he stops short of challenging the norm of public clothedness itself. A number of scholars have written on naturism – often highlighting its psychological, social, and health benefits – but they generally avoid endorsing public nudity (West, 2017; Barcan, 2001, 2004a, 2004b; Górnicka, 2016; Parmelee, 1929). The idea of critiquing the prohibition of public nudity remains, for the most part, unthinkable from within the Western ideological order.

And it is precisely this – the fact that nudity remains ideologically inconceivable – that makes it such a compelling site for testing the limits of the order.

12. An unconventional project: journey plan

My choice of carrying out philosophical work as a practice of (my) everyday life may seem confusing. Within the normal ideological order, radical critique is expected to take place

either as abstract philosophy or as art (including poetry or literature). In this work, I attempt to explore the possibility of radically critiquing the normal order – and in doing so, I immediately place myself outside of it. By stepping beyond what is considered 'appropriate', 'intelligible', or 'good', I ask the reader to engage with a text that may not fully make sense within conventional academic or cultural frameworks.

This work also rejects the established organization of academic knowledge – its subdivision into formal disciplines – which helps to maintain the order by policing what can and cannot be properly said. The result is necessarily experimental, a work-in-progress, and inevitably imperfect. There may be issues with some of my arguments, and perhaps there could have been better ways to write this text. Nevertheless, I remain convinced that there is far more value in attempting to do or say something different than in contributing to the endless repetition – or polite affirmation – of the established order, including as it manifests in so-called 'critical' academia.

Below, I sketch the general structure of this work, which is organized as a journey beyond the limits of the order. The chapters – the stages of the journey –are arranged not chronologically, but logically – following the movement of philosophical and experiential inquiry.

Methodology. Before embarking on my journey, I explain my choice to write an autoethnography – combining accounts of my real-life experiences challenging the societal prohibition of nudity with interdisciplinary theoretical analyses. Implicit in the autoethnographic nature of this work is the recognition that my experiences and reflections are inseparable from my specific position as a white, male, middle-aged individual, as well as my theoretical perspective.

This work is divided into four parts and seven chapters:

<u>*Part 1: 'Intention'*</u> – where I present the conceptual problem.

Chapter 1. I introduce the notion of *posthumanist freedom*, developed through a reading of Foucault. I interpret Foucault as building on Kantian and Nietzschean themes. Foucault's posthumanist reflection points to unexplored spaces of individual freedom beyond societal norms and moral frameworks. I ask: Can I really experience this kind of freedom in real life? I begin by challenging the Western prohibition of nudity, to see what happens.

Part 2: 'A Theory of Nudity' – where I develop my theoretical understanding of the Western prohibition of nudity. This discussion precedes the autoethnographic part of the work because my theoretical lens necessarily shapes what follows.

Chapters 2. I outline the history of the prohibition of nudity in the West, characterizing it as a religious prohibition in the Durkheimian sense. I examine the exclusion of naked corporeality from the social world and explore how this separation reveals the ideological and religious nature of the norm. I also reflect on the role of shame in relation to nudity, as shame typically marks a breach in the social bond.

Chapter 3. I go deeper into the religious foundations of the Western prohibition of nudity, which I argue is central to our humanist framework. Drawing on Christian theology, I examine the metaphysical separation between humans and animals. I then trace how this Christian/humanist idea – of humanity as clothed and superior to animality – has underpinned colonial projects and continues to order both European and post-colonial subjects along a 'sliding scale of humanity' in which clothedness and body-shame play key roles.

Part 3: 'Adventures in real life' – where I undertake the experiment and challenge the societal norm of clothedness in various settings: prison, university, and public spaces.

Chapter 4. I describe my experience of nudity in prison. Contrary to what I expected, I found the prison environment deeply hostile to nudity. I explain this hostility through the ideological importance of clothedness in Western constructions of humanity – and the intense desire of prisoners to be recognized as fully human.

Chapter 5. I recount my experiences of being nude at university and in public. I share accounts of the visceral, often hostile reactions I encountered, and examine the widespread assumption that the (male) body is inherently violent and 'sexually' dangerous. I was repeatedly told to hide myself for the sake of public safety – even though the violence came from others, not from me. I analyze the traumatic processes of socialization that produce these fears and this obedience, and the ideological transformation of Christian prohibitions on 'exhibitionism' into concerns framed as public safety.

Part 4: 'Pause for reflection' – where, bruised by the social response to my attempts at introducing my body into public spaces, I pause and reflect.

Chapter 6. I consider how my ethical practice of freedom is perceived by many as unethical, violent, or dangerous. I draw comparisons with other historical forms of segregation, often justified on the grounds of protecting the public from supposed sexual dangers. I frame my experiment as a confrontation with Western (male) modesty culture – a largely taboo subject – and explore its similarities with other struggles against modesty across the Abrahamic world.

Chapter 7. Faced with the risks of existing as a body in an anti-body society, I consider accepting the fact of segregation and retreating into naturist spaces, where my body is not seen as a public threat. However, I find these spaces also have problems of their own. In trying to present nudity as acceptable to mainstream society, naturism ultimately reinforces the very humanist values I sought to challenge.

The brief conclusion summarizes the key insights of this work. The intense emotional reactions provoked by my non-conformity reveal just how central the prohibition of nudity is to the Western metaphysical and ideological order. These reactions show how effectively shame continues to regulate mass conformity – and how fragile, and precious, moments of freedom really are.

Methodology: an interdisciplinary and autoethnographic journey

> '*Modern sociology… studies separation exclusively by the means of the conceptual and material instruments of separation*'
> (Debord, 1994, Thesis 196)

<u>Introduction</u>

These adventures are my attempt to explore the limits of my freedom, in my everyday life, in England. By playing with public nudity and questioning its 'obvious' exclusion and prohibition, I ask: to what extent can I experiment with difference and question the obviousness of the everyday order within the conformist society in which I live? Does living within my society mean that I am trapped in a religious/ideological/discursive prison that I must ultimately accept?

This is not an abstract or theoretical question. Through my engagement with nudity and its prohibition, I aim to make my critique of ideology an everyday *practice* – like Diogenes the Cynic, or a kind of performance philosophy. In this text, I document and reflect on my attempts to engage in a critical practice of casual nudity. I write autoethnographically to reproduce as much as possible my real-life experience, documenting both my practice and my thought processes. By reflecting on my experiences, I connect ideas from philosophers, sociologists, psychoanalysts, neuroscientists, political theorists, activists, novelists, and others that help me make sense of my world. My goal is to recreate the unity of myself, perspective, and life, without dividing them into separate academic 'disciplines'.

To accurately represent the unity of my life, I employ a mixed-modality approach. This work is primarily an autoethnography, where I write about myself, but it is also interspersed with

theoretical reflections. This is because my theoretical understanding is an important part of my experience of the world. I agree with Kant on the unity of pure and practical reason – my theoretical reflections are never abstract. By weaving together my life experiences with theoretical reflections, I aim to replicate the natural unity of theory and practice within my own life.

1. Genealogy of this project: beyond theory

This project began as a theoretical reflection on critique, while I was a philosophy PhD student at the University of California, Riverside. However, I grew increasingly frustrated with the conformist, uninspiring everyday practices within academia. Critical reflection felt pointless – disconnected from practice, it was sterile at best.

As a PhD student at the University of California, I once proposed running a clothing-optional philosophical discussion at a 'radical' and 'critical' graduate conference. I wanted to explore how people's attitudes might change without their protective armour of clothing, taking them out of their comfort zones. I wanted to shake the system from its stagnation and make things more interesting – but the 'radical' organizers panicked. They informed me that nudity was illegal on campus. In hindsight, I don't even think it was[12], which demonstrates how resistant many individuals are to engaging in unconventional critique, preferring instead to echo the 'critical/radical' views and practices of their peers.

I quickly became disillusioned with the possibility of meaningful critique within academia. Losing interest in academic critical work, I began using my own body in my personal practice. I started sewing my own unconventional clothes and experimenting with nudity. However, I did not believe these practices could be integrated with my academic work, which I felt had to remain hollow and boring to be considered proper and respectable.

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[12] California Penal Code 314.1 criminalizes 'indecent exposure' only if one exposes their genitals for sexual gratification or to offend another. I doubt the University of California had stricter rules against nudity.

Then, the UK charged me with a crime I did not commit[13]. I had to leave California, my Philosophy PhD, and my teaching responsibilities to stand trial in London. I spent two years in prison. When I resumed working on my PhD from my prison cell, I was filled with rage for what 'respectable' society had done to me. I no longer wanted to play their games. I was not going to join in the academic practice of hollow, performative 'critique'.

2. From abstract theory to autoethnography: theory as a map

It became evident that the problem of the feasibility of critiquing the order I pose in abstract philosophical terms in Chapter 1 needed to be addressed through my own critical practice and engagement with my social world, not with more empty words. Consequently, these 'adventures in posthumanist freedom' were conceived as an attempt to use my own lived experience of critical practice to explore and discuss the possibility of freedom and critique. Theory remains central throughout this work as the medium through which I make sense of everything, but it is not an end in itself.

The second part of this work – 'A Theory of Nudity' (Chapters 2 and 3) – is still largely theoretical. This theoretical discussion sets the scene for my subsequent discussion of critical practices. Whereas Chapter 1 is a philosophical and specific introduction to my research question that engages with the development of the reflection around freedom and critique in Kant, Nietzsche, and Foucault, Chapters 2 and 3 are thoroughly interdisciplinary. This interdisciplinary approach serves to replicate the complexity of my understanding of the Western prohibition of public nudity, which is the product of a lifetime of reading, reflection, experiences.

In this second part I also begin to introduce my own personal experience. Here I discuss my own personal experience to explain my theoretical views. I do not claim my theoretical picture to be 'true' in any absolute sense: it is just what I believe because of my experience of life (so far). It would have been dishonest to sketch a preliminary theoretical picture without

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[13] See Preface.

engaging with the personal experience from which it arose, and it would also have been dishonest to discuss my personal experiences that follow without stating the theoretical framework through which I make sense of those experiences – as if I could claim to have learned some 'truth' about the world through unmediated experience.

This interrelation between autoethnography and theory, which persists throughout this work, follows from Kant's argument in the *Critique of Pure Reason*, with which I agree. It is impossible to make any sense of the world without 'prejudices' (the *a priori* of knowledge), and it is delusional or dishonest to claim that our knowledge about the world is solely the product of our experience – for this experience is itself framed by the *a priori* conditions of possibility of our knowledge. The impossibility of separating my theoretical-conceptual framework from my lived experience is also a major reason why I chose autoethnography as my main methodology in this work.

3. Autoethnography and the unity of life and of the self

After my philosophical intention-setting and my preliminary theoretical discussion, the rest of this work is largely autoethnographic. I recount my real-life experiences trying to explore the 'beyond' of the societal prohibition of nudity. On the one hand, my choice of autoethnography reflects my decision to disengage from hollow and performative academic 'critique', which I now see as largely futile and inherently conservative. I wanted my critique of ideology and exploration of freedom to be my everyday practice, and so my writing became a way to document and reflect on my experiences. On the other hand, I question the value of theoretical reflections divorced from lived experience and from the affective dimension real-life inevitably involves.

Nietzsche writes that supposedly-abstract philosophical writing and autobiography are always intertwined:

'I have gradually come to realize what every great philosophy so far has been: a confession of faith on the part of its author, and a type of involuntary and unself-conscious memoir' (BGE 6).

For Nietzsche, theoretical reflections are *always* autobiographical. The question is whether the autobiographical aspect of philosophical reflections remains 'involuntary and unselfconscious' or if it can become voluntary and conscious. I agree with Nietzsche: the goal of self-aware reflection is to embrace and articulate the autobiographical nature of our thinking, thereby restoring the unity of thought and life. It is this restored unity of thought and life that I hope to achieve through writing autoethnography.

Christopher Poulos defines autoethnography as

'an autobiographical genre of academic writing that draws on and analyses or interprets the lived experience of the author and connects researcher insights to self-identity, cultural rules and resources, communication practices, traditions, premises, symbols, rules, shared meanings, emotions, values, and larger social, cultural, and political issues.' (Poulos, 2021: 4).

When writing autoethnography, we heed anthropologist Michael Jackson's advice to

'make ourselves experimental subjects and treat our experiences as primary data' (1989: 4).

In doing so, we strive to abandon the fiction of being impartial observers of an objective world and acknowledge, recognize, and value the inherent unity of subject and object, theory and practice, thought and life. I resonate with Arthur Bochner's view that autoethnography allows

'all parts of ourselves — emotional, spiritual, intellectual, and moral — [to be] voiced and integrated in our work, as it is in our lives' (2017: 69).

Some may argue that making oneself an 'experimental subject' and treating personal experience as primary data diminishes the value and quality of the results, making them 'less scientific'. I disagree. Like Nietzsche, I view any claim of objectivity as illusory or insincere. The omission of the observer from the text – their body, emotions, moral and intellectual perspectives – does not render it 'more objective': it renders it meaningless. No research is ever detached from the researcher's standpoint, experience, emotional states, conceptual framework, and personal motivations. Against any power games that may underlie the separation between subject and object, theory and practice, or thought and life, I feel the closest I can come to some 'truth' is by honestly documenting my own lived experience in the world and reflecting on questions as they arise – 'within episodes of unfolding instances of lived-through life' (ibid.: 72).

Of course, I do not claim to be telling a universal story or revealing the absolute 'truth' about the matters I touch upon, but at least I am telling the truth of my own experience as it unfolds[14]. Others may or may not find similarities between my experience and theirs – and they may or may not sympathize with my reflections, – but in any case, I do not think there is much more I can or should aspire to do with my writing.

4. Language

The attempt to reflect in my work the unity of theory and practice – of philosophical reflection and everyday life – also informs my choice of language. As much as possible, I have tried to write in the same 'common' language in which I think in my real, everyday life.

I see the use of academic jargon and 'technical' language in academic publications as reinforcing the very separation between thought and life that afflicts much of contemporary academia. It renders academic reflection self-referential and irrelevant -- often unintelligible, or simply too boring to be of interest, to most readers.

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[14] To be precise: the truth of how I remember them, the truth of the trace life experiences has left in me (see Bochner, 2017: 72ff.)

While the use of some 'technical' language may occasionally be justified for the sake of precision, my general approach in this work is to speak in the language of ordinary thought: the language I *actually* live and think in.

5. Autoethnography and disorder

Real, lived life is messy. Emotions are rarely self-evident or static. Interpersonal relations are chaotic and complicated. The system of relationships we are all part of is too intricate for any social theory to fully capture. One of my main reasons for writing autoethnography is to explore the messiness of real life rather than trying to deny it by creating a 'rigorous' and 'logically coherent' – and therefore, arguably, fake and meaningless – theoretical picture. I don't want to explain away contradictions – as if life were orderly, or as if establishing order were the aim thought should set itself. Fantasies of order may make people feel secure, but they are not real – and they can hinder our ability to navigate the messiness of real life.

In what follows, I do not propose solutions to create another societal order – a 'better' normative framework. I merely delve into the unresolvable messiness of life. In real life, disorder is everywhere: in the inconsistencies within any moral system, in the conflicts between affective and conscious beliefs, in the differences between individual perspectives, and so on. I agree with Foucault that attempts to reconcile these inconsistencies and create order are games of power – wanting to organize is wanting to control and dominate ((2000: xiii). Order is oppressive; to become freer, we need to embrace disorder, otherness, chaos – in the words of Nietzsche/Zarathustra: 'One must still have chaos in oneself to be able to give birth to a dancing star.' (Z, Prologue: 5)

In writing autoethnography and reflecting upon my own stories, I aim to show how oppressive attempts to impose a moral order can be. I challenge universal rules dictating how much of our bodies can be publicly exposed by highlighting the problematic and violent history behind the modern Western prohibition of nudity and the variety of affective responses that have emerged as a result.

Without presenting a comprehensive theory, I highlight the complexity of emotional responses to nudity, which vary based on factors such as gender, race, class, age, personal histories, cultural background, and any intersections of these (and many other) variables. In such a complex context, attempts to impose prohibitions that claim to protect everyone inevitably lead to further violence and less freedom for all, including, arguably, many who endorse the imposed order. By engaging with the messy, lived experiences of real people, my aim is to reintroduce complexity and disorder in opposition to the false sense of clarity and 'obviousness' offered by dominant moral discourse. I reject the temptation to propose yet another moral system to be imposed on others, seeking instead to redefine ethical reflection as an ongoing process of embracing complexity and disorder.

6. Autoethnography as a means of understanding both myself and others

If contradictions and inconsistencies are not to be resolved but should be accepted as part of life, then one might question the purpose of ethical reflection. One answer is that by integrating ethical reflection with autoethnography, I gain a deeper understanding of myself and how I navigate this complex, messy world. And while my self-understanding improves, I also become more aware of others. Thus, the application of the autoethnographic method to ethics enables me to reflect on my own ethical practice of freedom amid life's complexities and messiness. I agree with autoethnography theorist Carolyn Ellis, who, in response to a PhD student's question about the benefits of writing autoethnography, said:

> 'you come to understand yourself in deeper ways. And with understanding yourself comes understanding others.' (2000: 738).

This understanding is a process – an *ongoing* process, without an outcome. By reflecting on my experiences and encounters with others, I progressively deepen my understanding of myself, my place within my society, and the perspectives and affective forces at work in both me and others. Instead of theorizing about others and society in general, autoethnographic writing allows me to encounter those others. This understanding – however partial and

uncertain it may remain – forms the basis for my ethical choices and guides my practice of freedom.

Throughout my adventures, I met people as living bodies, and engaged in conversation with them. In these encounters, I faced their affective responses, and discovered mine. It became evident to me that people experience the world in very diverse ways, which I can never fully comprehend or make assumptions about. I realized that I cannot think about society without acknowledging these diverse experiences and affective responses. I cannot theorize while sitting at my desk, based on some abstract idea of what others may think and feel.

Furthermore, through my engagement in these 'adventures in posthumanist freedom' as an embodied being within a social world, I have come to understand that in order to be successful and sustainable, freedom must be a collaborative project. Experiencing anger and violence directed towards me has been painful. This pain has taught me that the posthumanist freedom I focus on cannot be an individual and solipsistic pursuit. This is because, despite my willingness to endure the angry and violent reactions of my society, freedom is not sustainable or desirable if it is painful.

And so, my youthful Nietzschean fantasy of freedom as an individual project fell apart as I experienced it in real life. I now agree with Claudio Moreira and Marcelo Diversi, who emphasize the interpersonal aspect of any project that involves real bodies and real lives:

'We do this project TOGETHER, with each other' (2022: 96).

PART 1: INTENTION – TOWARDS MORE FREEDOM

Chapter 1: The project of posthumanist freedom

'Those who don't move, don't notice their chains'.

(Luxemburg[15])

<u>Introduction</u>

This work is about freedom. My interest in freedom – or, rather more accurately, my craving for it – grew out of my experience as a prisoner interned for two years in Her Majesty's prisons in England. The experience of the obvious and oppressive unfreedom of life behind bars resulted in my yearning for freedom, which this project attempts to address. However, a quest for 'freedom' can be an ambiguous project. The more 'freedom' became vital to me – as a response to the unfreedom which was imposed on me in prison – the more elusive it turned out to be. When I was locked in my tiny prison cell for 23 hours a day and subjected to regular and senseless abuse by any prison guards I imprudently tried to speak to, it was easy to think of 'freedom' as that which those who were not in prison enjoyed. Freedom was the thing I had enjoyed in my previous life (prior to being handcuffed and taken away), the prized possession of the passers-by I could see from the tinted windows of the prison vans who transferred me to and between prison establishments, of my family and friends on the outside I could call from my prison phone, of the people I could see on TV from my cell, and of course those abusive prison guards who enforced my unfreedom. But was the idea and practice of freedom really *that* simple?

Over the two years I spent in prison, living conditions gradually improved for me. Over time, as prisoners prove that they obey the rules and discipline imposed on them, they are

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[15] Although this quote is often attributed to Rosa Luxemburg, there is no evidence that she ever actually said or wrote this specific sentence.

progressively allowed more 'freedom'. Gradually, I was allowed to leave my cell for a few hours a day to work in the prison library. Then I was allowed longer 'association' time and during 'association' time, I could wander beyond my own landing and into other areas of the prison complex. Many months into my prison experience, I was transferred to a lower security prison where the door to my cell was unlocked for several hours a day, allowing me to move 'freely' around my wing. In this lower security prison, the exercise yard was not enclosed by tall concrete walls, and I could even see the horizon in the distance. At least for a while, it did feel like *freedom*. Months later, I was transferred to an even-lower-security prison where I was never actually locked inside my cell. Although I was confined to the prison complex, I was allowed to largely walk around it, 'freely'.

Towards the end of my time in prison, I was even occasionally allowed to leave for the day, to spend time with my wife and daughter as well as do my academic work. This allowed me to start feeling the freedom that I would fully obtain upon my release. I interacted with people in the free world (that is, outside prison), and did the normal things that free people do: like walking around town, going to shops, and eating in restaurants. It was a gradual process of adapting again to the freedom that non-imprisoned citizens enjoy.

Although this may seem hard to believe for those who have never experienced anything like prison, every marginal increase in 'freedom' felt like a massive achievement. I will probably never forget my first night in the low-security prison of HMP Ford, West Sussex, where, for the first time in more than a year, I was allowed be outside of my cell and even venture out of the block at night, on my own, for as long as I pleased. It was an incredible experience to, breath fresh air, under the stars, with no time constraints, no bell signalling it was time to return to my cell, no prison guards watching over me. In that low-security prison, we slept in ex-military billets where we had freedom to move around and organize our lives as we wanted. For instance, I could shower whenever I wished and had unrestricted access to a small kitchenette. There were no bars on my window either. Of course, I was still a prisoner, and there were fences and barbed wire separating me from the outside world. However, the feeling of 'freedom' I had from no longer being locked up behind a heavy steel door was like nothing I had ever experienced before. It was perhaps only comparable to a drug-induced euphoria, but one lasting for weeks.

Eventually, I was released from prison and went home. However, I soon discovered that being released from prison did not equate to being truly 'free'. Even as I was writing the first draft of this chapter from my living room, where I was able to live a mostly free life, I was still not quite as 'free' as everybody else. Specifically, I was still under probation and subject to several restrictions. For instance, I couldn't travel abroad, and even within the UK, I needed a special permission from my probation officer. Although I was no longer behind steel doors or surrounded by concrete walls and barbed wire, I was still acutely aware of the unfreedom of my condition. I couldn't go back to my home country, Italy, or take my daughter on holiday as I would have loved to do. Furthermore, many of my belongings remained in my California home, where US visa regulations against 'immoral individuals' prevent me from ever returning. Some of these limitations will be lifted over time; in the UK, my sentence will be 'spent' 11 years after my conviction, and only then will I again be allowed the same freedoms of people who were never convicted of a crime. Will I then *truly* be 'free', perhaps?

I have described my personal experience of imprisonment and progressive liberation to suggest the direction along which I seek to problematize the notion of freedom in this work. Freedom of course is a very vague and often abused concept, prompting important questions such as 'what is freedom?', or 'who is truly free?'. The experience of obvious unfreedom thus not only fuels a desire for freedom but also a desire to understand it better. The more we strive for freedom, the more its elusive and ambiguous nature becomes apparent. How can I become truly 'free'? Are the 'free' people around me *truly* free? There is something very striking about the experience of being released from prison after two years inside and realizing that, to some extent, everyone is stuck in a prison.

In saying that 'everyone is stuck in a prison' (that everyone is 'unfree'), I am not suggesting that everyone is deprived of their civil or 'human' rights in the same way as prisoners are. Instead, I am resisting the identification of freedom with 'rights', which defines liberal political philosophy and which, following the bourgeois revolutions of the late 18th century, has arguably become 'common sense'. I am not interested in the notion of freedom as the right or power people may (or may *not*) have to 'do as they wish', nor am I interested in ideas

of 'positive' or 'negative' freedom[16]. Instead, my interest lies in exploring the freedom we may *or may not* have to do things differently, to be different, and to reject the established order of things in order to discover what other possibilities of being may be available to us. In a world where everyone seems to be thinking and acting alike, and imposing this same uniformity on others, the prized 'freedom' of rights and of liberal thought feels empty and perhaps delusionary – inadequate to address the fundamental unfreedom of our orderly social existence.

In this preliminary chapter, I attempt to sketch this concept of freedom with the assistance of Foucault. I discuss his critical engagement with the Kantian enterprise and his reappropriation of Nietzsche in the context of post-war France and of 1968. Building on his studies of how diffused power and the discursive order of our world (with its criteria of knowledge, truth, etc) constitute our subjectivities and thus our subjection, in the latter part of his life Foucault suggests a theory of freedom as the capacity we still retain (to an extent) to resist the operations of power. This includes both the ways in which we are shaped by power and our own domination of others:

> 'I don't believe there can be a society without relations of power...The problem is... to give one's self the rules of law, the techniques of management, and also the ethics, the ethos, the practice of the self, which would allow these games of power to be played with the minimum of domination' (1989a: 446)

In this project, I use Foucault's appropriation of Nietzsche's critique of power and his posthumanist account of freedom to support my own experimental and subversive practice. Thus, the aim of this preliminary chapter is to lay the theoretical foundations for what follows. Foucault's account of freedom is not without tensions and difficulties: however, it is *precisely* these tensions and difficulties that make the project interesting and worth researching. If freedom (or resistance) were simply about overpowering some external oppressive force, there would not be much need for discussions like this one. But things are more complicated. For example, our desire to be free cannot be separated from an awareness

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[16] And, for the avoidance of doubt, I am not interested in the 'freedom' that is at stake in the free will vs. determinism debate either

of the role of a shared normative framework in all our relationships and practice. Subjection has a positive aspect that cannot be ignored if we are serious about de-subjectivation. Additionally, the ubiquity of power relations creates a tension between Foucault's idea of an aesthetics of existence and his call to minimize domination. In this preliminary and foundational chapter, I introduce these tensions, which I then explore practically in the rest of this work.

This chapter is organized as follows. I begin with a discussion of Kant's article 'What is Enlightenment?', to contextualize and ground my later discussion of Foucault's (and Nietzsche's) critical reappropriation of the Kantian project of freedom (section 1). Then I discuss Nietzsche's critical engagement with the Kantian project, which forms the foundation for Foucault's perspective (section 2). Next, I explore Foucault and his reappropriation of the Kantian and Nietzschean project as a *historical ontology of ourselves* (section 3). I argue that Foucault views his historical ontology of ourselves as a practice of freedom (section 4). I contrast the 'posthumanist' freedom of a historical ontology of ourselves with the humanist ideal of freedom as liberation and discuss Foucault's critique of the power dynamics inherent in various 'humanisms' (section 5). I introduce the positive aspect of Foucault's idea of freedom as self-creation (section 6). I address some common criticisms of Foucault and defend his intuition that bodies and pleasures can provide an experience outside of our established order, subjectivity and subjection (section 7). Finally, I conclude by considering the tension between the idea of freedom as a historical ontology of ourselves and the idea of freedom as self-creation. I suggest that an exploration of Foucault's 'posthumanist' freedom in our social existence should focus on studying how our work of self-creation impacts the power and social relationships that define our shared social world (section 8).

In the chapters that follow, I explore these problems by discussing of my practical attempts to experience 'posthumanist' freedom through nudity.

1. Kant: 'What is Enlightenment?'

In 1784, Kant published an article in the *Berlinische Monatschrift* titled 'What is Enlightenment?'. Here, Kant defines Enlightenment as 'man's release from his self-incurred tutelage': his inability, due to 'laziness' and 'cowardice', to 'make use of his understanding without direction from another' (2007: 29). Kant argues that individuals are not accustomed to reasoning for themselves, and in fact, for most, 'life under tutelage has become almost [their] nature' (ibid: 30). They are 'fond of this state' of dependency, unable to reason for themselves because they have never been allowed to even try. The system of established rules that governs social life ensures people do not use their own reason. However, Kant suggests that as people gain more political freedom, they will start using their own reasoning. He emphasizes the importance of the 'public' use of reason, where individuals speak not from their own perspectives but as citizens of the world (or, as 'scholars'). Here reason comes to its true domain, allowing an epistemological critique of dogmatism and a critique of tyrannical political institutions. As individuals are allowed – and encouraged – to reason for themselves, they will autonomously organize their social existence based on reason. Kant urges the monarch, the State, and religious institutions to support and embrace these developments rather than imposing their will on their subjects by preventing them from publicly discussing the common good (ibid: 35 ff.).

Kant's article contains important points that clarify his critical project. Reason establishes shared norms and standards of truth, enabling individuals to reason together, and construct a shared world. It allows people to make sense of their place within this world and to articulate their perspective to themselves and to others. Reasoning together brings individuals together not just as members of a community but also as 'citizens of the world'; it allows people to coexist and cooperate regardless of shared natural ties (such as family or 'blood'), preserving individual autonomy. For Kant, reason (in its public and cosmopolitan use) and freedom are inseparable: the freedom to reason enables free citizens to collectively create a shared world they all find agreeable:

> 'The very existence of reason depends upon this freedom, which has no dictatorial authority, but whose claim is never anything more than the agreement of free citizens, each of whom must be able to express his reservations, indeed even his *veto*, without holding back' (*Critique of Pure Reason*, A738/B766).

And thus, reason allows citizens to unite within a shared normative framework, ensuring the greatest freedom for all ('the greatest human freedom according to laws that permit the freedom of each to exist together with that of others', *Critique of Pure Reason*, B373).

However, it is important to clarify what 'freedom' is at stake here. For Kant freedom is 'independence from being constrained by another's choice, insofar as it can coexist with the freedom of every other in accordance to a universal law' (*Metaphysics of Morals*, 6:237). This is, essentially, the liberal (and, arguably, 'common' in the West) understanding of freedom as the ability one may have (or not) to do as he or she wishes – as long as it doesn't interfere with the freedom of others. Kant explicitly links this 'freedom' to 'humanity': he states that this freedom is 'the only original right belonging to every man by virtue of his humanity' (ibid.). This innate *right* to freedom becomes actualized when citizens use the reason they possess *insofar as they are humans* to critique tyrannical power and together establish an Enlightened cosmopolitan commonwealth, which ensures everyone's freedom (as long as it is 'consistent with the freedom of everyone else and with the common good' *Critique of Pure Reason*, A752/B780. To Kant, ideas of reason, humanity, and freedom are inseparable.

On a broader level, this concept of freedom, which is evident in Kant's article, is the one we inherited from the Enlightenment and the liberal tradition. I consider Kant a champion of this view – although, generally speaking, these were the ideas of the new bourgeoisie that rose to power towards the end of the 18ᵗʰ century. It is the same notion of 'freedom' as stated in the *Declaration des Droits de l'Homme et du Citoyen* of 1789, which begins by proclaiming that: 'Men are born and remain free and equal in rights' (art. I) and goes on to define freedom as 'the power to do whatever does not injure another' (art. IV), within the limits of the law which is 'expression of the will of the community' (art. VI). The preservation of freedom is the aim of political association of men in a community (art. II).

In the next section, I seek to complicate this picture of 'freedom'. One major problem is that it conceives of power as external oppression of people's innate freedom – this is clear in Kant's plea to Frederick II in his Enlightenment article. Similarly, the *Declaration des Droits*

de l'Homme et du Citoyen states that the aim of the civil community is 'resistance to oppression' (art. II). *Our* reason – in its public, cosmopolitan use – is thus seen as opposed to *external* power and on the side of freedom. Furthermore, by othering oppressive power, this picture makes problematic assumptions about the neutrality of reason in establishing a shared set of norms. In the next section I consider objections by Nietzsche and Foucault to argue that the relations between reason, power, and freedom are, in fact, more complex than Kant and the liberal Enlightenment suggest. Thus, the task of the Enlightenment is perhaps less straightforward than Kant and his contemporaries envisaged.

2. Nietzsche on power and self-knowledge

On the view I sketched out (and oversimplified for the sake of my argument) in the above section, the Enlightenment and Kant see in our autonomy and in the 'public' use of reason the tools to resist oppression and to restore our 'natural' freedom. The idea is that human beings, by reasoning together can overthrow their chains and become 'free'. A hundred years later, Nietzsche returns to this Enlightenment ideal of freedom. His starting problem is perhaps similar to that expressed by Kant in his article on the Enlightenment – 'man's release from his self-incurred tutelage'. Nietzsche sees the evidence of this ongoing 'tutelage' in the masses' social conformity and apparent lack of critical sense. He complains that men behave like a herd – and without even requiring a shepherd: 'No shepherd and but one flock! All men will alike, all are alike' (*Z*, Prologue: 5).

The fact of men's herd-like behaviour even in the absence of a shepherd is evidence for Nietzsche of a problem with the notion that 'reasoning together' in the name of our shared 'humanity' or 'autonomy' may be the path to 'freedom'. Nietzsche believes earlier writers had misunderstood the nature of power. Rather than seeing power as an external force that reason may oppose, Nietzsche argues that the '*will to power*' is in fact the essence of all life (GM II, 12). Power is everywhere as the organizing and driving force of all forms of life, including ourselves and our social relationships. Thus, for Nietzsche it is absurd to simply oppose freedom to power; in fact, he argues that the 'instinct of freedom' and the 'will to power' are one and the same thing (GM II: 18). Social phenomena must be understood as the

effect of what Foucault will later call 'games' of power, involving tactics and strategies whereby different agents seek to maximize their outcomes. Nietzsche applies this model to explain the development of our notions of morality (GM I), guilt and punishment (GM II), and the value of asceticism (GM III), all of which are grounded in our own desire to experience power. When our historical situation means better avenues are unavailable to us, we resort to expressing power over ourselves or over whomever and whatever else we can (GM II 12, 16-22).

Our 'conscience', too, is for Nietzsche the product of games of power that are largely beyond our understanding ('Everyone is farthest from himself', GS 335). Rather than relying on our conscience and judgment as the basis of our 'autonomous' actions, Nietzsche urges us to explore the origin of our beliefs and values and to question our allegiance to them:

> 'Why do you *listen* to the words of your conscience? And what gives you the right to consider such a judgment true and infallible?.... you have to ask, '*how* did it emerge there?' and then also, '*what* is really impelling me to listen to it?' You can listen to its commands like a good soldier who heeds the command of his officer. Or like a woman who loves the one who commands. Or like a flatterer and coward who fears the commander. Or like a fool who obeys because he can think of no objection' (ibid)

For all his making fun of 'old Kant', Nietzsche does in fact *embrace* the Kantian project: he praises Kant as the one who had '*broken open* the cage' (ibid). His criticism is directed towards a certain notion of autonomy on which the Enlightenment project rests, the idea that our beliefs and values as a community are, or can be, the product of an Enlightened 'reasoning together' through which we can overcome dogmatism and create a 'free' society for all. Against this, Nietzsche argues that in constructing a shared normative world for each other, we are exercising power over both ourselves and others, considering 'one's own judgment as universal law' when, really, we do not even know if our judgments are ever truly 'ours', let alone applicable to others (ibid.). To be sure, Nietzsche's point here is *not* that we should stop engaging normatively with each other or that we should stop 'reasoning'. On the contrary, Nietzsche urges us to take *more seriously* the critical function of reason, continuing and deepening the original Kantian project of a critique of reason. We must now try to

understand the origin of the judgments we take to be 'ours' and of our allegiance to them. In the meantime, as we really do not know who or what we 'are', and who or what speaks through 'us', we must watch ourselves and try not to impose the judgments we (wrongly, most likely) assume to be 'ours' on others, and neither on ourselves:

> 'Let us therefore limit ourselves to the purification of our opinions and value judgments and to the creation of tables of what is good that are new and all our own' (GS 335).

On Nietzsche's account, the 'death of God' has not significantly affected how people live – their obedience to universal moral rules they have no say on, their acceptance of dubious value judgments, and so on – because in practice people prefer to live a comfortable and easy existence. They follow the received rules and conform to others' behaviours, rather than engaging in the hard work of questioning themselves, their judgments, and their way of life; they do not take risks exploring or creating different ways of being, thinking, acting (Z, Prologue: 2-5). Thus, Nietzsche calls for 'man' as we know it and experience it to be overcome and to be replaced by a new type of human, by the *Übermensch* (ibid.) – the '*posthuman*'. Starting from the next section, I discuss Foucault's appropriation and development of this Nietzschean project.

3. Foucault's appropriation of the Kantian and Nietzschean project: a historical ontology of ourselves

When Foucault turns to the Kantian Enlightenment project as outlined in the 1784 article, he also focuses on Kant's interpretation of the Enlightenment as an 'exit' from the immaturity 'that leads to accepting someone else's authority in areas where the use of reason is called for' (Foucault, 2007a: 100 – his remarks echo the Nietzschean 'breaking open of the cage'). Reason, understood as a historical and collective activity in which the human community is engaged, enables us to free ourselves from obedience and tyranny, and become free (or autonomous). From the importance of this function assigned to reason stems the fundamental significance of the thorough critique of reason that Kant had begun in his major works (ibid:

104). Like Nietzsche, the urgent problem for Foucault is that the project of such a critique of reason appears to have ceased and even reversed, leaving people in a state of immaturity and submission to forces beyond their comprehension.

This critical engagement with the Kantian project runs through the entire life work of Foucault. Already in his early dissertation on Kant's *Anthropology*, Foucault argues that post-Enlightenment thought has neglected the true meaning and foundational importance of a *critique* of reason, instead focussing on creating more and more positive 'knowledge'; whereas,

> 'In fact, the moment we think that we can give critical thought the value of positive knowledge, we will have forgotten the essential point of Kant's lesson (2008: 118)'

The argument is further developed in *The Order of Things*. The emphasis on generating new positive knowledge after the initial critical endeavour has placed man in the 'ambiguous position as [both] an object of knowledge and as a subject who knows' (2009: 340), transforming him into 'a strange empirico-transcendental doublet' (2009: 347).

Having mostly forgotten the Kantian lesson about the necessity of a thorough and ongoing *critique* of reason, man now believes he knows himself as well as everything else. The result is man's inability to encounter difference and otherness: 'modern thought is advancing towards that region where man's Other must become the Same as himself' (2009: 358). The universal obedience that was once justified in the name of God is now justified in the name of reason, but the result is the same: 'precritical naïveté holds undivided rule' (2009: 349).

Therefore, Foucault urges us to re-engage with the project of critiquing reason. He continues the reflection that Nietzsche had begun[17]; starting with questioning 'our' judgments and 'our' knowledge:

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[17] 'I am simply a Nietzschean, and I try as far as possible, on a certain number of issues, to see with the help of Nietzsche's texts' (1989b: 471)

'Ought we not to remind ourselves – we who believe ourselves bound to a finitude which belongs only to us, and which opens up the truth of the world to us by means of our cognition – ought we not to remind ourselves that we are bound to the back of a tiger?' (2009: 351).

Who 'we' are – our subjectivity, our consciousness, the 'I think' – is a product of the historical and cultural context in which we exist and of our particular situation within it. It changes with them. As Allen puts it: 'human subjects are always constituted by and embedded in contingently evolved (and thus transformable) linguistic, historical, and cultural conditions' (2011: 47). Or, in Foucault's own words, 'men are perpetually engaged in a process that, in constituting objects, at the same time displaces man, deforms, transforms, and transfigures him as subject' (ibid).

If this is right, then we must problematize the understanding of the Enlightenment as an 'exit' from the immaturity 'that leads to accepting someone else's authority in areas where the use of reason is called for'. This is because engaging in reasoning with others is a process through which *we constitute ourselves as subjects*, or transform our constituted subjectivity, and in doing this we accept the authority of – and are shaped by – our environment and context. Reason cannot simply free us 'from' power because power is everywhere, in all the relationships we have with our environment. No forms of knowledge (whether self-knowledge or any other knowledge) can exist independently of it. In fact, 'we' – our subjectivity, consciousness, the 'I think' – are from the beginning a product of the diffuse power relationships in which we exist, of disciplines and technologies of power. There can be no question of being 'free from' power, because power is what constitute us in the first place:

'The man described for us, whom we are invited to free, is already in himself the effect of a subjugation much more profound than himself. A 'soul' inhabits him and brings him to existence, which is itself a factor in the mastery that power exercises over the body' (Foucault, 1991: 30)

This observation leads Foucault to reformulate the critical enterprise as 'a critique of what we are saying, thinking, and doing through a *historical ontology of ourselves*' (2007a: 113).

Foucault's 'historical ontology of ourselves' (or 'ontology of the present'; Foucault, 2007b: 95) entails a return to the questions Nietzsche poses in *The Gay Science* (GS 335). We must ask ourselves why we hold certain values and beliefs, what the 'value' of our values is, why we feel we must obey them, and so on. We must adopt an attitude of distance (or skepticism) from 'ourselves' – what Rajchman calls 'the endless questioning of our constituted experience' (1985: 7). Criticism must take the form of 'a historical investigation into the events that have led us to constitute ourselves and to recognize ourselves as subjects of what we are doing, thinking, saying' (Foucault, 2007: 113). In the next section I discuss in further detail what Foucault means by this.

4. Foucault's historical ontology of ourselves as practice of freedom

Subjectivity, at the same time as bringing with it subjection to the power and normative standards that constitute it, is also that through which we exist and engage with others in the social space. Our own investigation into the genealogy of our own constitution as subjects – the work we do on ourselves to understand 'us' as the depository of a history of power relationships and disciplines – takes place in our social context and affects the entirety of the system of relationships in which we exist: with others, with things, and with ourselves. When Nietzsche asks us to 'limit ourselves to the purification of our opinions and value judgments' (GS 335), he is already asking us to re-consider our place in the world, to adopt a skeptical attitude that will radically change the way we relate to everyone and everything. By distancing ourselves from 'our' opinions and judgments, we stop imposing on others – and on ourselves! – the order that those opinions and judgments enforce. Those opinions and value judgments do not colour the world for us anymore, and we may then be able to encounter difference, otherness. We stop attempting to impose sameness on our world. A historical ontology of ourselves thus changes the ways in which our constituted subjectivities act as instruments of power over everyone and everything we relate to.

Foucault makes the point particularly clearly in the Preface he wrote for Deleuze and Guattari's *Anti-Oedipus* (2000: xi-xiv). Our major enemy, he says, is our love of power, which he calls 'fascism':

'not only historical fascism, the fascism of Hitler and Mussolini—which was able to mobilize and use the desire of the masses so effectively—but also the fascism in us all, in our heads and in our everyday behaviour, the fascism that causes us to love power, to desire the very thing that dominates and exploits us' (2000: xiii).

We must understand ourselves as products of power and disciplines in order for us to remove ourselves as much as possible from the system of relationships of dominations in which we exist. According to Foucault, we must 'rid our speech and our acts, our hearts and our pleasures, of fascism' and 'ferret out the fascism that is ingrained in our behaviour' (ibid.). Once we understand power as internal to who (or what) we are, we must reconceive our resistance to oppression as work that we need to do, first of all, *on ourselves*. Foucault gives us some ideas on how to go about minimizing the domination that is involved in the 'games of power' in which we participate:

- We should resist our tendencies to seek totalities, unity, and order, and to organize the world through subdivisions, hierarchy, and fixed structures. We should not see (and thus impose) permanence where everything is always in flux. The order we impose on the world is a form of domination.
- Similarly, we should not ground our practice in 'truth'. Foucault argues that truth is an effect of power, contrary to the common perception of knowledge as a process of discovering truths that already exist in the world. As part of any historical ontology of ourselves, it is important to recognize the 'truths' we believe as an effect of power. To reduce the intensity of power relations, we must reduce our attachment to truths.
- In our political practice, we should move beyond the liberal idea of 'rights' of the individual. Foucault states that 'the individual is the product of power' (2000: xiv). Through the hierarchical organization of 'individuals', each with their 'rights', power organizes political society. Seeking 'rights' is seeking power.
- We should not be 'sad', Foucault says. We should not suppress our desire, enjoyment, pleasure, or fun. Self-imposed suffering ('sadness') is an expression of power we exert over ourselves, as Nietzsche argues in the *Genealogy*. When we feel powerless

to change the world, we redirect our power against ourselves (GM II 16-17). This love for self-inflicted domination must also be minimized[18].

The points listed above (the imposition of order and 'truth', the insistence on 'rights', our ascetic practices) are all important instances in which we engage in games of power in our everyday life to maximize the power we express towards the world, others, and ourselves. Once we understand freedom as resistance against the power dynamics that shape our subjectivities – and thus manifest in our daily practices – we must become aware of all the ways we engage in games of power (with others and ourselves) in everything we do. We should consciously strive to minimize domination. In this sense, the list Foucault gives us is indicative, not exhaustive. His own conclusion sums it up perfectly: We should not 'become enamoured of power' (ibid).

No list of how we exert and channel power can ever be exhaustive. Reflecting on the fate of the Enlightenment ideal over the past two centuries, Foucault observes that the intensification of the struggle for freedom and the growth of individual capabilities have been accompanied by a corresponding increase and intensification of technologies of domination (2007: 116). Modern disciplinary society, he argues in *Madness and Civilization*, *Discipline and Punish*, and *The Will to Knowledge*, is a post-Enlightenment development aimed at containing and neutralizing the increasingly established 'freedom' of the individual:

> 'The eighteenth century doubtless invented our liberties; but it gave them a profound and solid underpinning – the disciplinary society from which we still derive'[19]

The task of critical thinking – a *historical ontology of ourselves* – involves attempting to critically evaluate our constitution as subjects and our subjection to the established order and power relations. 'How are we constituted as subjects of our own knowledge? How are we constituted as subjects who exercise or submit to power relations? How are we constituted as moral subjects of our own actions?' (2007a: 117). The development of modern disciplinary

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[18] Not only does this result in unnecessary suffering for us, but this inward redirection weakens our ability to challenge the established order of things: 'it is the connection of desire to reality that possesses revolutionary force' (2000: xiv).

[19] From the original dust cover of *Discipline and Punish*, quoted in Rajchman, 1985: 64

society, which Kant could not have foreseen in his days, is the reason why Foucault believes we must now reengage with the project of the Enlightenment, updating it and continuing it. What reason may perhaps have achieved before the invention of modern disciplines is now beyond its reach, because the way power operates has changed. Freedom now requires more effort than Kant could have imagined in 1784.

5. 'Posthumanist' freedom – as opposed to 'humanist' freedom as liberation of man

In this section, I will contrast Foucault's idea of freedom with the mainstream currents of thought that Foucault reacts against in 1960s and 1970s France. This is important to understand the central aim of Foucault's opposition to power itself, as opposed to those who talk of 'freedom' as part of their own power games.

Foucault sees himself as continuing the Enlightenment project of Kant, but he rejects the humanist foundations of the original Enlightenment project. Enlightenment writers generally viewed humanism as fundamental. For example, Kant considered the concept of humanity crucial to his views on reason, the community of reasoners, and autonomy. They tended to contrast the critical stance of humanism with religious dogmatism. However, Foucault, emphasizes the ways in which ideals of humanism and conceptions of man are inseparable from the power relations in which they arise and actively reproduce. He proposes that we abandon humanism altogether (2007a: 111). The empty and vague reference to a common human essence hides the underlying assumptions and value judgments that come with these ideas. The concept of 'man' and his attributes serve as hierarchical criteria for differentiating between people. Foucault pointedly notes that 'humanism' has often been invoked for political reasons (ibid), from the era of European imperialism – with the political need to justify the conquest of primitives and sub-humans, – to today's racism and thinly veiled Western imperialism.

The historical association of the concept of 'man' with whiteness and maleness has increasingly come under critique by contemporary critical theorists, particularly those engaging with the intersections of race, gender, and power. Nowadays 'posthumanism' is an

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academic buzzword among scholars seeking to highlight how this association not only reinforces exclusionary notions of humanity but also perpetuates systemic inequalities tied to these constructs (Wynter, 2000, Spillers, 1987, Fanon, 2008).

However, Foucault, working in the 1960s and 1970s, was primarily reacting against the humanist stance of the main critical currents of his time – Marxism and psychoanalysis. Foucault sees unexamined operations of power at work in both Marxism and psychoanalysis, and their reliance on humanist themes (2009: 349 – 355) is a symptom of this. Ultimately, it is these unscrutinised operations of power that Foucault opposes.

Marxists, according to Foucault, are 'the political ascetics, the sad militants, the terrorists of theory, those who would preserve the pure order of politics and political discourse. Bureaucrats of the revolution and civil servants of Truth' (2000: xii). Order and Truth hide operations of power (the imposition of order and truth), and so do asceticism and sadness (the will to power turned inwards of Nietzsche's *Genealogy*). Marxists, like modern-day Churches, established mass organizations that exercised power over their members without critically questioning how power operated within and through them. In a 1983 interview, Foucault compares the rhetoric of a senior French Socialist politician, who discussed replacing 'the egoist, individualist, bourgeois cultural model with a new cultural model of solidarity and sacrifice' to that of Pétain (1983: 208). Foucault's disappointment with the organized (Marxist) mass movements of the 1960s and 1970s is well documented (cf. Foucault, 1988, and Dean and Zamora, 2021). These organizations do not permit any scrutiny of how power operates within them, which means they are not truly on the side of freedom – they are just another player in power games.

Psychoanalysis too, for Foucault, is problematic, because its claim to 'liberate' us also conceals unscrutinized operations of power. Like Marxists' assumptions (i.e., impositions) of Truth and order, psychoanalysis begins with arbitrary assumptions about the nature of 'man' – particularly his 'hidden' nature – which effectively imposes an underlying order and establishes its own criteria for truth, a theory of power, and a path to 'freedom' (2000: xiii). This criticism echoes his arguments in *The Order of Things* (2009: 356-8) and in an interview conducted by Alain Badiou (1965), where he accuses psychoanalysis of positing an unknown

Other (such as the unconscious, or unrepressed sexuality) and then urging us to 'know' or 'free' this newfound otherness that supposedly defines our 'nature'.

It is worth noting that Foucault is not alone in critiquing psychoanalysis and Marxism in these ways[20]. However, these critiques help us understand Foucault's own concept of freedom, which involves being aware of and resisting power rather than subscribing to an ideal of 'freedom' that ultimately enables the assertion of *even more* power.

The same perspective underlies Foucault's critique of the 1960s and 1970s social movements calling for 'sexual liberation' in the name of Freud, Reich, and Marcuse (e.g., 1989d). These movements tended to assume a fixed, 'natural' sexuality that needed to be 'liberated'. According to Foucault, the call for 'liberation' actually hides an operation of power that imposes a certain idea of sexuality and desire as 'natural'. The more we focus on liberating 'our' repressed sexuality, the less we notice the ongoing and simultaneous operations of power that shape our sexual desires (cf. *The Will to Knowledge).* The task of a historical ontology of ourselves is to understand how our sexual desires became 'ours' in the first place and resist *this* operation of power. It is important to note that what needs to be resisted is not the alleged repression of a mythical original 'free' sexuality, but rather the ordering and categorization of sexual desires, the normalization of certain types, and the concept of 'sexual identity' ('sex is not a fatality', Foucault says. 1989d: 382). The more we concern ourselves with rebelling against the 'repression' of our sexual 'instincts' or 'natural' desires, the less we realize that we are complicit in the imposition of certain sexual norms and standards of desire on ourselves.

6. Posthumanist freedom as self-creation through practical experimentation and transgression

It is important to start with Foucault's analyses of how diffused power operates in and through all of our relationships (to the world, to others, and to ourselves), as well as his

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[20] Among those who advance similar criticisms of psychoanalysis, see Fanon (2008) and Deleuze and Guattari (2000). The list of those who made comparable criticisms of Marxisms is innumerous. To be sure, Nietzsche had already realized this when he discussed 'anarchists'' 'intoxication of power' in TI: 34

critique of foundationalism in order to understand his concept of freedom as resistance to the constitutive effects of power and as self-creation that goes beyond the standards of an orderly, organized, and disciplined society. Foundationalism, according to Foucault, conceals the operations of power. Any assertion of a human nature, 'truth' about us, or 'truth' about how society or history 'truly' functions is actually an exercise of power that seeks to establish conformity and compliance. We should be cautious of this, regardless of whether it comes from positions typically associated with conservative or reactionary forces or supposedly progressive or radical ones. Marxism, psychoanalysis, structuralism, phenomenology, positivism, and the Church are all culpable in this regard. As Foucault says in the *Archaeology of Knowledge*:

> 'Do not ask who I am and do not ask me to remain the same: leave it to our bureaucrats and our police to see that our papers are in order' (2002: 19)

However, once we acknowledge the presence of diffused power in all relationships and reject the traditional paths to freedom, we may well question whether perhaps we should discard the notion of freedom altogether. As discussed earlier, a 'historical ontology of ourselves' can help us recognize how we are shaped by power and how we reproduce it in our everyday lives. It can prompt us to interrogate the established forms of our experiences and develop a mindset of distance and skepticism towards our value judgments. In a way, this mindset already constitutes a form of resistance to power and, as discussed in section Four, a practice of freedom.

However, this conception of freedom is not entirely satisfactory. At the beginning of this chapter, I outlined my frustration with the realization that most free individuals in the 'free' world seem to be acting alike, as if they all were in some sort of self-imposed prison. This is perhaps a similar feeling to what motivates Kant (who complains about people being stuck in a 'self-incurred tutelage') and Nietzsche ('all men will alike, all are alike'). To address this frustration, it is not enough to question our inherited value judgments and to attempt to refrain from imposing them on ourselves and on others. We require something more – a positive account of freedom. In this section I try to sketch Foucault's proposal for such an account – his idea of freedom as 'self-creation'.

I begin by tracing this ideal of self-creation back to Nietzsche. Nietzsche complements his initial (negative) advice to question our value judgments with a positive call to create our own values (GS 335). Zarathustra's journey follows the same path (Z, III 12 and IV). However, Nietzsche/Zarathustra's ultimate refusal to engage with the current historical form of humanity perhaps prevents him from formulating any substantive positive proposal or path towards something different. The arrival of the *Übermensch* – and thus of self-creation as a real possibility and a dream – remains for him a vague hope suspended in a Messianic future, as observed by his friend, psychoanalyst Lou Salomé (1988). In contrast, Foucault's engagement with the systematic ways in which disciplines and power relationships operate and produce unfreedom and 'herd behaviour' in our society may provide him with the conceptual tools to begin proposing a concrete path beyond our present historical stage, to give some definition to the 'undefined work of freedom' (2007a: 114). Foucault does not want the affirmation of freedom to remain an 'empty dream' (ibid.) and it is his search for a concrete, practical, and experimental path that I find interesting and worth exploring.

In his major works (From *Madness and Civilization* to the first volume of his *History of Sexuality*, *The Will to Knowledge*), Foucault examines ways in which discourse and disciplines shape the possibilities for our world – how we can think and act, and so on. Normalization and compliance are achieved through discursive ideas of truth, identity, and so forth. As we come into the world as subjects, we are already subordinated to the power that constituted us. Some may interpret this account as suggesting that any notion of autonomy is illusory and that it denies the possibility of critical self-transformation. There is a real danger of overstating the influence of structuralism on Foucault's thinking here, thereby implicitly limiting the potential for any meaningful 'freedom'.

However, this would be a mistake. Foucault states, 'where there is power, there is resistance' (1998: 125, 1989g: 223). The ubiquity of effects of power (of micro-relations of power) entails the ubiquity of resistance:

> 'Once power produces this effect, there inevitably emerge the responding claims and affirmations, those of one's own body against power' (1980: 56)

There is no need to incite external resistance to counter power, for resistance is already, always present wherever there is power:

> 'Where there is power, there is resistance, and yet, or rather consequently, this resistance is never in a position of exteriority in relation to power' (1998: 125)

This does not mean that subjectivation (and thus subjection) fails. It means that it is never as smooth as some theoretical arguments may suggest. There is an incommensurability between the body and the form that power imposes upon it, which inevitably results in gaps and cracks in any assumed subjectivity, or in some excess of some sort. Resistance is part and parcel of how power works, a remainder that arises out of the impossibility to construct fully coherent and stable totalities. At a minimum, the presence of forms of resistance alerts us to the fact that a power struggle is taking place; it points to the exteriority and incommensurability of body and 'soul' and, thus, to the instability of the existing order of things. In other words, the presence of resistance reveals an operation of a power, which, however successful in achieving mastery, nonetheless results in the construction of an order that is the result of violent colonization of bodies by power (i.e., it is not 'natural'). This awareness of the instability of the order of things, of the partiality of any mastery that power can achieve – of the artificiality and ultimate impossibility of totalities – is an opening onto the possibility that things could be different from what they are now. But how can we – as subjects – explore these *other* possibilities?

Crucially, Foucault maintains that although our subjectivity is discursively constituted, our subjection is ultimately voluntary. For Foucault, people remain fundamentally free in their relationship to themselves and to each other. Power only works on free action:

> 'In order for power relations to come into play, there must be at least a certain degree of freedom on both sides' (1989a: 441)

Ultimately, *we construct our own subjectivity and, thus, our own subjection.* Therefore, while it would be absurd to think that we could, from our own subjective position, somehow

overthrow the broader system of power relations, there is some scope for individuals to change the way they relate to power and the way in which they inhabit the micro-relations of power in which they exist. Once we learn to notice and question the beliefs and judgments, we impose on ourselves (e.g., our delusions of 'identity'), we do have some freedom to reject them and replace them with something else. Foucault exhorts us to replace our present obsession with identity and with the various versions of 'hermeneutics of the self' – the search for 'who we really are' – with a radically different relation to ourselves as *creation* or *invention*:

> 'The relationships we have with ourselves are not ones of identity, rather they must be relations of differentiation, of creation, of innovation' (1989d: 385)

As we reject fixed and static identities, normalized standards of desire, and so on, we have the capability of embracing nomadic, flowing, differential and nonunitary notions of the self. We can engage in ongoing processes of de-individuation (2000: xiii), dis-identification, and de-subjectivation. Foucault locates the potential for 'freedom' in this process, which he understands as

> 'the endless proliferation of meanings, which undermines the stability of the historical a priori determining possible ways of seeing, understanding, and acting. Rather than thinking of the subject in terms of individuals and of freedom as something they have or do not have, he suggests that we attempt to think of the subject as a discursive effect and freedom as a non-subjective opening up of possibilities for multiple creative practices.' (2005: 87)

Freedom is to be located and studied at the level of the discursive and ontological order of things, which determines what is possible and what isn't. The limits of freedom are the limits that the order of things places on what is intelligible; what lies beyond is the excluded, the Other. Freedom is the transgression of those limits. Commenting on his relationship to the Kantian critical project, Foucault suggests that,

'If the Kantian question was that of knowing what limits knowledge has to renounce transgressing, it seems to me that the critical question today has to be turned back into a Positive one… The point, in brief, is to transform the critique conducted in the form of necessary limitation *into a practical critique that takes the form of a possible transgression*' (2007a: 113)

The practical critical task of creating 'new' selves beyond the limitations imposed by the discursive order means experimenting with transgression, with ways of being, thinking, and acting beyond the limits of what is normally considered acceptable or conceivable (2007a: 114). Following the axis along which discursive (im)possibilities are problematized in some of his main books (1991, 1995, 1998), that may mean experimenting with madness, criminality, perversion. But how could a subject constituted by power and by the established discursive order explore what for it is 'impossible', inconceivable, prohibited, undesirable?

7. Bodies and pleasures as outside subjectivity

According to a common criticism of Foucault's account of de-subjectivation, it is not clear how subjects, as products of normalizing power, can access genuinely different possibilities of being – for example, Charles Taylor argues that '[Foucault's] Nietzschean programme on this level doesn't make sense' 1984: 172. The presence of resistance doesn't automatically grant the subject access to a dimension *beyond* what discourse allows. At most, the subject can choose between alternatives within the realm of what is already discursively 'possible' – essentially choosing between alternative modes of subjugation. This may well be the form that 'freedom' takes in liberal consumerist ideology – but it is not (obviously) Foucault's idea of freedom. Similarly, commentators sometimes criticize theories that celebrate the subversive power of 'desire' (which abounded in the 1960s and 1970s) because, arguably, our desires are already a product of power – and inseparable from of our constituted subjectivities. Therefore, the argument goes, how can desire grant us access to a space 'beyond' that which is shaped by the current system of power relationships?

Foucault's response to this often-stated criticism is crucial because it reveals how we should understand his proposal to play with the limits of our discursive order and subjectivity and to engage in transgression. He acknowledged that our desires are indeed part of the very subjectivity that is created by power and discourse; they do not exist prior and independently of it, and therefore they cannot lead us to any space beyond discourse (1989d). In fact, most of our desires are discursively constructed to support and reinforce the power structure. Instead, it is in *bodies* and in *pleasures* that we should seek evidence of resistance to power and the potential for creating something new and different:

> 'Desire is not an event but a permanent feature of the subject: it provides a basis on to which that psychologico-medical armature can attach itself. The term pleasure, on the other hand, is virgin territory, unused, almost devoid of meaning... It is an event 'outside the subject', or at the limit of the subject, taking place in that something which is neither of the body or the soul, which is neither inside nor outside – in short, a notion neither assigned nor assignable.' (Interview of 10 July 1978, quoted in Oksala, 2005: 129)

Thus,

> 'The rallying point for the counterattack against the deployment of sexuality ought to be not sex desire, but bodies and pleasures' (1998: 157)

Foucault suggests that, if we could discover and experience new pleasures, desires would naturally follow. These desires would be a desire to experience those pleasures again, not the kind of desire that comes pre-packaged and attached to subjectivity[21]. The idea is that, instead of beginning with a pre-existing subjectivity or identity that guides us in our experience of life, we should experiment with something completely new. By doing so, we let the resulting *memory of pleasure* in the body lead us beyond our limited subjectivities or limiting identities. Foucault calls for the

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[21] Arguably, Deleuze and Guattari's psychoanalytically-derived use of 'desire' is in fact closer to Foucault's 'pleasure' than to the common usage of 'desire' as arising out of our subjectivity. It is a bodily energy which ultimately resists meaning. Foucault himself suggests as much (1983: 204).

'creation of new possibilities of pleasure, which people had no idea of previously….
The point is to experiment with pleasure and its possibilities' (1989d: 384)

We can now also make better sense of Foucault's call for playing with limits and transgression (2007a: 113-4). Usually, we don't take advantage of the freedom we (always) have to think and act *differently* (in infinite ways!) because we don't see those alternatives as desirable (we may think of them as unpleasant, inappropriate, absurd, and so on). However, by adopting an attitude of skepticism and engaging in a historical ontology of ourselves, we may come to suspect that these judgments and beliefs are simply effects of power. In response, we can choose to disregard our judgments and beliefs, transgressing the limits of what is considered appropriate or desirable. We can rely on bodily feelings of pleasure to guide us as we explore the new and uncharted territories of possibilities. By distancing ourselves from our constituted subjectivities and following the guidance of bodily pleasures, we may discover countless new ways of being beyond the uniformity and order dictated by discourse. This opens up the possibility of a world where people don't all think and act alike – where the 'free' world doesn't feel like an enlarged prison yard anymore.

8. An ethics of freedom – with its problems, tensions, paradoxes. Guidelines for practice

I have explained above that I am interested in Foucault's discussion of freedom because I see in it the potential to ground a practice aimed at challenging what I perceive as self-imposed imprisonment by most people. It seems to me that 'free' people of our 'free' world in fact impose upon themselves and upon others a great deal of uniform standards and norms, which stop them from fully experiencing their freedom. By systematically engaging with the complex ways in which diffuse power operates through all our social relationships, perhaps Foucault can help us explore practices of freedom in ways that do not reproduce – or worsen – the games of domination that define much of our world. However, some difficulties may appear when one tries to follow Foucault on his path to freedom. Foucault's ethical project is composed of two parts, which to some extent complement each other – but which also, arguably, remain in tension. In this section, I will explore this underlying remaining tension,

which accompanies us throughout the project of trying to be 'freer' and to play with limits and rules without wanting to be either alone or a tyrant.

On the one hand, Foucault urges us to be skeptical of our beliefs, judgments, and identities. These are all effects of power; hence we should be careful about imposing them on others – and on ourselves. We should minimize all 'games of domination' – or, 'do not become enamoured of power' (2000: xiv). In plain words, 'don't be a dick'. This is sensible and relatively uncontroversial. Following Nietzsche, Foucault goes further and critiques our Western notion of morality as a *code* or a set of rules that people must obey (1989e: 451). He suggests that we think of ethics as 'the conscious practice of freedom' (1989e: 435) – an ongoing engagement with our agency and with that of others around us, beyond any rules or codes. Ethics for him is 'the form that freedom takes when it is informed by reflection' (ibid.). Domination happens not because of disregard for moral rules but, on the contrary, because our received notion of morality as unreflective obedience to rules means people do not learn to take care of themselves and to reflectively engage with their desires in the context of the world they share with others:

> 'The risk of dominating others and exercising a tyrannical power over them arises precisely only when one has not taken care of the self and has become the slave of one's desires.' ('Ethics of the Concern for Self', 1989a: 438)[22]

This first part of Foucault's ethical project aims to minimize the domination that takes place in all relationships.

On the other hand, there is Foucault's aesthetics of existence. He urges us to create new selves, to 'de-individualize', dis-identify, and 'de-subjectify', to play with the limits and transgress, to discover non-subjective possibilities for multiple creative practices. We are asked to 'deploy the forces of desire' in the process of 'overturning the established order' (2000: xii). This is a positive project, aimed at experimenting with different ways of being in our lives, embodying the change we want to see in the world – in our everyday practices.

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[22] Foucault refers to the Greeks and Stoics as holding this view before Christianity (2019)

Foucault explicitly gives examples of changes that took place in the 1960s and 1970s in relation to attitudes towards authority, sexuality, and relationships between the sexes (2007a: 113).

However, doubts arise about how de-subjectivation, transgression, and creative practices can take place without affecting (and often *intensifying*) our roles and relationships, to the extent that following established and shared rules is necessary for engaging with each other in ways that most people feel are right and appropriate. This points to a potential contradiction between 'do not be a slave of your desires' and 'deploy the forces of desire to overturn the established order'.

Kant may help us think about this problem. He believes that a shared morality is embedded in a shared social world. In expecting reason to 'free' people from their self-incurred tutelage, he believes that reason provides the basis for a shared, universal moral code (cf. *Groundwork*). Moral rules are an integral part of the coherent system of practical and theoretical knowledge in which we exist. Moral rules, practices, and knowledge are all systematically related. Kant's freedom is not the freedom to be different, or to disobey. When Foucault urges us to question the established order and explore alternative possibilities of being, he incites us to perform local interventions that will inevitably impact other dimensions of our shared social existence and will be perceived differently by different people depending on their situation and perspective. Furthermore, the impossibility of a God's eye view means that we have no way of fully appreciating how our transgressive practices may affect the system of social and power relationships in which we exist and intervene. Because all relationships involve power dynamics, any different and unexpected behaviour will involve some power play. We may try to be aware of it and consciously aim to *reduce* the domination involved, but it is very possible (or *likely*) that others will interpret our actions as *exerting* power and react (negatively) accordingly.

The point can be illustrated by analogy with the way language works. Language provides a systematic way for individuals to engage with each other, much like our practices and forms of knowledge construct a system of relationships that gives meaning and sense to our shared world. To be sure, the order and sense of language are ultimately arbitrary, just like our

discursive order and the practices it sustains. Literary avant-gardes have long experimented with transgressing the rules of language in an attempt to explore new possibilities. This is not dissimilar to what Foucault would like us to do in transgressing the rules that preserve the established order – and Foucault's own interest in literary avant-gardes is significant in this respect (Foucault, 1987; Rajchman, 1985; Oksala, 2005). However, if we suddenly begin transgressing the rules of our shared language, there is a real risk of misunderstanding, and potentially a breakdown in social relationships. Like in the case of language, our attempts to rebel against the practical rules that define our subjectivity might take us on equally undesirable paths of either loneliness (as in the case of Nietzsche/Zarathustra) or our conduct being misunderstood – perhaps, an attempt to exert *more* (and not less) domination.

Foucault is aware of these problems. In his reflection on the Enlightenment project, he encourages us to perform creative and experimental interventions (transgressions) not only as disorderly and contingent practices but also in relation to the systematic nature of our shared world. He suggests some guidelines and axes along which we may want to reflect on our practices. The aim is to reduce domination – yet this happens in a systemic context, where all practices and all interrelations are tied together. Relations we have with ourselves, with others, and with things are all interconnected, he says: when we act upon one, this will affect all the others too (2007a: 117). Likewise, knowledge, power, and ethics are also profoundly and systematically interconnected. Whenever we question one dimension, we must analyse the effects on the other dimensions.

Finally, we must remain aware of the general structure that regulates inclusion or exclusion in our shared world (i.e., what is permitted or prohibited). In his major works (1995, 1991, 1998), Foucault argues that thoughts and actions that are banned from our society are labelled as madness, criminality, and perversions. Respectable citizens do not entertain 'mad', 'criminal', or 'perverse' thoughts and certainly refrain from actions that may 'reveal' madness, criminality, or perversion. What counts as mad/criminal/perverted may change over time, but Foucault argues that these categories form the criteria of inclusion/exclusion in modern Western society. To explore our 'posthumanist', non-subjective, freedom is to uncover new (previously excluded) possibilities of thought and action; this requires disregarding labels of madness, criminality, and perversion, and our desire to stay away from

them. Individuals on their path towards dis-identification and de-subjectification must systematically embrace their 'madness', 'criminality', and 'perversion'. At the very least, this takes a lot of courage.

The question that remains to be explored and can only be explored through our practice, is whether and how this could work. Is there really a way out of the paradox that makes our subjection to existing power relationships also the means for us to normatively engage with each other? Do we, as individual agents, have any scope to be different or to create a space for something different than what is 'normal'? This is not an abstract theoretical question but one that must be addressed through creative experimental political practices – practices that perhaps we do not even know yet, practices still to be discovered and experimented with.

Conclusion

I started this chapter by asking whether the 'free' people around me are truly free. It is a strange feeling when one leaves prison only to realize that, to some extent, everyone seems stuck in a prison – albeit one without bars, steel doors, or prison guards. Now that I am not in prison anymore, I want to make the most of my freedom. I want to practically experiment with being freer than I perceive most people around me to be. With the help of Foucault, I proposed a posthumanist account of freedom that I hope could ground my own experimental ethical practices.

The picture of freedom I sketched above is not free of difficulties and does remain somewhat abstract. Yet, it lends itself to practical applications through experimentation. The tensions I highlighted in Foucault's account may only become apparent as I *concretely* explore alternative, *disorderly* ways of thinking and acting. In this sense, practice serves to deepen my understanding – as Foucault says, 'Use political practice as an intensifier of thought' (2000: xiv).

In what follows, I choose to use my own political practice of nudity as an entry point to engage with the problem of disorder – 'as an intensifier of thought'. The prohibition of public

nudity holds such a foundational place in the Western social/religious order that breaches are almost unconceivable. By experimenting with public nudity, I explore what happens when I seek to experience the freedom of disobeying one of the most unquestionable norms of my world. How easy/feasible/realistic is it to experience this freedom? And what can such experiments teach me about the relationship between individuals and societal order? Foucault explicitly situates his reflection on freedom in the tradition of Sade, Nietzsche, and Artaud (2009: 357). But can I aim for that same sort of freedom – the freedom of thinking and acting outside of accepted norms – without suffering the horrible personal consequences that Sade, Nietzsche, and Artaud *all* had to endure?

I begin by sketching my preliminary understanding of the prohibition of nudity which I – and everybody I know, see, or I am aware of – obediently comply with, every day. This serves as a tentative 'map' which I will rely on to make sense of my experiences of transgressing social norms, which I discuss in later chapters. In the next chapter, I begin by suggesting that the prohibition against public nudity has a fundamentally *religious* character. I say 'religion' in the broader sense in which religion is understood by (in particular) Durkheimian sociology, as the fundamental metaphysical/conceptual schema which orders a society's world, and thus distinguishes that society from others, which organise their world through different metaphysical/conceptual schemata. This religious prohibition is enforced by the affective forces that generally uphold the religious order of societies: especially, *shame*.

PART 2: A THEORY OF NUDITY

Chapter 2: Why do we have to wear clothes? On the religious character of the prohibition of public nudity

'The naked human being is generally a disgraceful sight – I am talking about us Europeans (and not even about female Europeans!). Supposing that by the mischievous act of a sorcerer, the merriest dinner party suddenly saw itself exposed and undressed, I think not only the mirth would be lost but also the strongest appetite discouraged – it seems we Europeans are utterly unable to dispense with that masquerade called clothing' (Nietzsche, The Gay Science 352)

<u>Introduction</u>

Every morning, before leaving home, I hide my body under clothes. My wife does the same, and we also dress our 4-years-old daughter, despite her protests. Presumably, *you* also cover your body before leaving home. But why do we all hide our bodies under clothes to participate in social and public life?

19th century philosopher and naturalist Henry David Thoreau writes in his *Journals*:

> 'What a singular fact for an angel visitant to this earth to carry back in his note-book, that men were forbidden to expose their bodies under the severest penalties!' (2011: 415)

Many who embraced the Enlightenment's ideal of rational critique similarly questioned the prohibition of nudity. According to the Marquis de Sade, the prohibition of nudity is 'unnatural':

> 'Modesty is an illusion… the result of nought but our cultural manners. Nature having created man and woman naked, it is unthinkable that she could have implanted in them an aversion or shame thus to appear. Had man faithfully observed nature's promptings, he would never have fallen subject to modesty.' (1968: 5).

And yet, for most people living in the Western world, casual, normal nudity is unthinkable (unwanted, shameful, etc).

In the previous chapter, I began a reflection on the ethics of disobeying social norms. I started from the Enlightenment's ideal that individuals should use their own mind to question accepted customs, beliefs, values. I read Nietzsche and Foucault as urging their readers to resume that Enlightenment's project of critique of inherited customs and herd-like social conformity. In both Nietzsche and Foucault, I found a call to reject morality as a code and instead embrace a project of self-creation. Nietzsche proposes an ideal of *Übermenschen* ('posthumans') capable of freeing themselves from the straitjacket of the morality of custom to explore the freedom of disorderly self-creation. Building on Nietzsche's ideal, Foucault encourages us to explore freedom as a non-subjective concept, where new possibilities for multiple creative practices exist beyond the normative order of our 'normal' world.

However, at the end of the previous chapter, I noted there remained questions which Nietzsche and Foucault leave unanswered. They urge individuals to challenge social norms and customs, but *in practice* these norms and customs serve to hold society together. First, it is far from clear whether individuals can simply choose to defy them – what is the nature of individuals attachment to them? Second, even if individuals could choose to disobey them, disobedience has consequences. For example, non-conformists are excluded from society: Foucault tells us that modern disciplinary societies, whilst making us believe in our 'freedom', have also created discourses and institutions which label those who dare to be

different as 'mad', 'criminals', or 'perverts'. Do our modern societies allow any space for non-conformity – for Foucault's 'ethical practice of freedom'?

This project is my attempt to explore the potential for such critical ethical practice by challenging the norm of public clothedness as a particular instance of a universally[23] obeyed social norm. I experiment with what Foucault calls a 'practical critique that takes the form of a possible transgression'[24]. I step into the liminal and dangerous space at the limits of the orderly world where my adventuring towards the non-subjective opening of posthumanist freedom may be subjectively perceived as loneliness, madness, criminality, perversion – or who knows what else. The cultural norm that prohibits public nudity is so deeply ingrained that it seems unquestionable: what happens when I try to defy it? Can I refuse to conform without facing punishment or becoming an outcast[25]?

I choose to focus on the prohibition of nudity because this is so 'obvious' and unquestionable in our Western/Westernized societies that it allows to study individuals' attachment to the order of their world with unusual clarity. Furthermore, the universality and 'obviousness' of the prohibition of public nudity we are used to is not, as I argue below, based on any 'objective' necessity. In the UK (and elsewhere), it is not imposed by any laws. Its status as a norm is somewhat vague: a fundamental cultural/social norm, a moral one, a norm that resembles a law without being a law, but which seem to carry more weight than laws do. Yet, ultimately, public clothedness is a *choice* that *everyone* living in the normal Western/Westernized world makes every day. I ask: what makes us (including *me*) conform? In other words, why are we so strongly attached to a normative order whose status is unclear, rooted, as I suggest below, in religious (and/or ideological: as per my discussion below, the two terms largely overlap) beliefs more than in anything else?

Although I may not be able to provide definitive answer to such complex questions, the apparent 'obviousness' and unquestionability of public clothedness, notwithstanding what I say are its unnecessary character and the lawfulness of public nudity, produce particularly

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[23] In our world – see below for a discussion of exceptions.
[24] See 1.6 above.
[25] For example, without becoming a madman, criminal, pervert, etc.

striking affective responses to breaches, which allow for interesting observations as to the mechanisms ensuring universal compliance to the (religious) order.

To be clear, I am *not* suggesting that the prohibition of nudity is 'wrong' or 'unreasonable', nor do I seek to disobey it because of its 'wrongness'. While I do – *on a personal level* – believe the body-negativity and body-shame of Western societies negatively affect people's health and wellbeing (as also consistently argued by psychological studies, e.g. West, 2017), – there exist conceivable counterarguments that may justify the prohibition of nudity. I am not interested in exploring or critiquing such arguments because my project is concerned with something completely different – with the feasibility of *exploring alternatives to the order*, regardless of whether they are or may be 'better'. Discussions of what alternative options are 'better' or 'right' are meaningless in a world which excludes radical alternatives *a priori* as 'impossible', or 'inconceivable'.

The unquestionable prohibition of public nudity makes any argument about its 'rightness' merely a justification of the *status quo*. No meaningful discussion as to whether the prohibition of public nudity is 'fair and sensible' or 'unfair and oppressive' can be had unless we establish that alternatives to the established order are (for us) possible. And if we are not free to access alternatives to the world as we know it, what are the implications for the ideal or critical freedom we inherited from the Enlightenment?

Before delving into my exploration of what happens when I disobey the prohibition of nudity, in this chapter I attempt a preliminary, theoretical discussion of the *character* of this prohibition: why do we have to wear clothes? After noting the universality of the norm of clothedness in the Western/Westernized world (section 1), I address two commonly heard misconceptions: that social and public clothedness is required by practical considerations (section 2), and that it is illegal to be naked in public (section 3). Following a brief historical survey of the prohibition of nudity in Europe (section 4), I suggest that this prohibition has a *religious character* in the Durkheimian sense (sections 5-6). This makes it invisible and unquestionable (section 7). Furthermore, individual compliance is produced by the fear of social exclusion – by the affective (physiological!) response we call '*shame*' (sections 8-10).

By understanding clothedness as a *religious* rule, which we must obey in order to ensure our social belonging, I explain the central role of shame in relation to nudity.

1. Why do we have to wear clothes?

I grew up in Milan, Italy, in a middle-class, academic family. My communist parents had long rejected the Catholicism of their respective families. Our home was meant to be free from any 'irrational religious beliefs', proudly embracing reason and science. However, nudity remained taboo; I do not even recall ever seeing my parents naked. As a child, I grew up ashamed of my naked body. Nudity was never explicitly 'prohibited' in my family: my shame did the job, and no explicit prohibition was ever needed.

This was normal in the Italian society I grew up in. I had friends whose families were more relaxed about nudity at home than mine, yet nudity in everyday social and public contexts was unthinkable[26]. There was never any explicit rule against nudity – it was just an unspoken understanding that it was prohibited – and thankfully so, given how ashamed we were of our naked bodies. Although I cannot speak for the experiences of others[27], I never heard anyone discussing nudity in ways that contrasted with my own experience. We were all clothed and ashamed. Growing up, I remember seeing people living naked and unashamed only in documentaries about African or Amazonian natives – and *of course*, we were different from them.

As I grew older, I went to university, travelled the world, and engaged with more people from different societies and social contexts. Everywhere I went, clothedness was the norm; social and public nudity[28] was unthinkable. I met people who were more comfortable with nudity than I was, I experienced naked saunas and nudist beaches – but in normal life, nudity was unthinkable *everywhere*. When I moved to London, I met people from many different backgrounds. I had friends from all over Europe, from Japan, China, India, North and South

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[26] Even in 'exceptional spaces' such as swimming pool's changing rooms, as kids and teenagers we would often cover up while changing.
[27] For example: girls or kids from different backgrounds?
[28] Outside of sexual or other exceptional contexts.

America, Australia, North and South Africa: yet the same prohibition of public nudity applied to all.

The ubiquity of this essentially-identical prohibition of public nudity has led me to see my own clothedness as an instance of a general societal/cultural fact – clothedness as ontologically prior to choices about the sort of clothes people wear, to the meanings they attach to their clothes or nudity, to their different reasons for their clothing choices and for not wanting to be naked. People choose *what* clothes they wear in public, not *whether* to wear clothes or not[29]. In conversation, many tell me their clothedness is the result of individual choice: but my experience of clothedness as a universal fact (across Western/Westernized societies) makes me doubt such claims: to what extent can compliance with a *universally* obeyed rule be claimed as an individual choice?

I do not want to dismiss the important differences in the meanings different people[30] attach to their clothes or nudity, different reasons for their clothing choices and for not wanting to be naked. My own experience of clothedness as a particular Italian white middle-class male, with my own personal history, is different from the experience of others, who may occupy different positions in society and have different personal histories. Intersectional analysis reminds us we should not claim our own experience to be universally valid[31]. And yet, the uncontroversial fact that in public we are *all* clothed – after having *all* been born naked – shows that the prohibition of public nudity is a societal fact, common to us all, which arose *prior to* – and hence *independently of* – the particular experiences of specific individuals or social groups.

If I am correct in understanding my (our) public clothedness as a shared, universally-obeyed societal norm rather than the result of individual choices or circumstances, the next question is: why do *we* (all, always[32]) have to wear clothes? In the next section, I discuss what is

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[29] If clothedness weren't the *premise* underlying subsequent clothing choices, surely there would be *some* people choosing nudity over clothedness.
[30] People of different cultures, social classes, genders, races, etc.
[31] We should also not claim that our experience applies generally across social groups we believe we belong to; I should not assume that my experience applies to all men, or to all Italians, or to all white people, or to all the middle-classes, etc.
[32] Exceptions apply, yet their exceptional character proves the rule.

perhaps the most commonly heard answer I hear to this question – that we wear clothes for warmth and protection from the weather.

2. Do we have to wear clothes for warmth and protection?

European writers in the past have often suggested that wearing clothes is 'natural' for humans, because we need clothes to protect ourselves from nature. Novelist and playwright Paul Ableman expresses the viewpoint of many modern Europeans when he states that:

> 'man is in fact a biological oddity, more naked in nature than other animals, whether because of hairlessness or skin colour' (Ableman, 1982: 8).

Sociologist J.C. Flügel in his seminal work *The Psychology of Clothes* refers to a

> 'general agreement among practically all who have written on the subject that clothes serve three main purposes – decoration, modesty, and protection' (Flügel, 1940: 10).

However, while I agree that clothes serve purposes of decoration, modesty, and protection, none of these arguments explain the *prohibition* of nudity. As a thought experiment, I can perfectly well imagine a society where individuals wear clothes for practical reasons such as warmth, or as decoration or status-symbols, but where clothedness is not *mandatory* – a society where individuals remain free to wear or not wear clothes as they wish.

Such societies did exist. Prior to European conquest and the subsequent forced 'civilization', the Inuit only wore warm animal skins *outdoors*, to protect themselves from freezing arctic temperatures. However, they were often naked indoors. Norwegian explorer Fridtjof Nansen writes about being disturbed by Inuit domestic arrangements, where many families lived together in shared houses, mostly naked (Bellamy, 2017: 48). As Inuk artist Rachel Attituq Qitsualik tells us, among the Inuit

'The nudity itself wasn't an item of curiosity. Unlike many other cultures, Inuit did not regard the naked form — male or female — as a focus for either lust or scandal. A human being without clothes was only that: an unclothed person. Boring.'[33]

The *obligation* to *always* wear clothes was imposed upon the Inuit by the European conquerors, as part of their 'civilizing' mission.

It is not even true that clothes are necessary for people when *outdoors* in the cold. The Yahgan of Tierra del Fuego, before being wiped out by the Europeans, had learned ways to live naked outdoors in their cold climate – by covering their bodies in seal fat[34]. Dutch explorer Jacques l'Hermite observed, in 1624, that these people were going 'about completely naked, without covering their private parts' (*Yaghan's, Explorers and Settlers*: 12). Two centuries later, Charles Darwin made similar comments on 'these people going about naked and barefoot on the snow' (ibid.). We must abandon once and for all the misguided idea that our clothedness is a *necessary* response to cold weather.

Fig. 3 Yaghan people.

The Yaghan people used to live naked in Tierra del Fuego, prior to the arrival of the Europeans

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[33] https://nunatsiaq.com/stories/article/the_naked_ladies_an_inuit_soldier_and_cultural_purgatory/
[34] *Yaghan's, Explorers and Settlers* (2008). Publication of the Martin Gusinde Anthropological Museum, Puerto Williams, Chile

Even more puzzling is the fact that the *obligation* to *always* wear clothes has been imposed on people living in warm climates too – for example, in the African regions where it is believed humans first appeared, in the very climates for which human bodies (presumably) evolved.

More generally, the suggestion that 'we have to wear clothes for warmth and protection' cannot explain the generalized *obligation* to wear clothes indoors and in warm weather. While there may be many reasons why individuals choose to wear clothes even where/when there is no apparent need for warmth/protection, none of these reasons justifies the existence of a universal, absolute, inviolable norm of public clothedness. Some may suggest that clothes may have evolved from decoration or practicality into a habit or norm – however, why would a common practice dictated by circumstances become *mandatory* for all?

Once acknowledged that our universal everyday clothedness cannot be justified with the need of keeping warm or protecting ourselves from the elements, many often suggest that ultimately, we wear clothes in public because we are legally obliged to do so – regardless of whether such a universal, absolute imposition of public clothedness is justified or not by practical or other reasons. However, as I explain below, this is not generally true. In particular, it is not true of England.

3. Do we have to wear clothes because we are legally obliged to do so?

Almost everyone I speak to seems to think that public nudity is illegal – that it constitutes 'indecent exposure'. And indeed, in many parts of the world, public nudity is criminalized under this heading. But not all legal systems take this approach. In England, where I live and work, the law does *not* prohibit nudity.

Under the legal framework of England and Wales, the Sexual Offences Act 2003 (section 66) defines the offence of 'indecent exposure') in the following terms:

A person commits an offence if:

(a) he intentionally exposes his genitals, and

(b) he intends that someone will see them and be caused alarm or distress.[35]

This statute does not prohibit nudity per se. It prohibits the intentional exposure of one's genitals *with the aim of causing alarm and distress* to a victim[36]. As long as the intention behind one's nudity is not to provoke alarm or distress to another, walking around naked is perfectly legal. In other words, nudity in itself – what is in law called 'passive nudity' – is legal in England. The law targets only the *intentionally violent* use of genital nudity. Its primary purpose is to criminalize acts of 'flashing', in which a person exposes their genitals in order to shock or intimidate others (see Chapter 5)[37].

Following a number of wrongful arrests made by police officers unfamiliar with this legal distinction, the UK police and the Crown Prosecution Service issued public guidance (Appendix A). These documents clearly state that the law does *not* criminalizes nudity itself, but the only the intentional use of genital nudity to cause alarm and distress. One section reads:

> 'The need to prove that the person exposed their genitals intending that someone will see them and be caused alarm or distress means that a naturist whose intention is limited to going about his or her lawful business naked will not be guilty of this offence.'

The same guidance instructs officers on how to respond to calls from members of the public reporting nudity. Officers are advised to explain that nudity is *not* illegal, and that the likelihood or certainty that someone may be alarmed does not meet the legal requirement of intentionality.

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[35] https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2003/42/section/66. In Northern Ireland, the Sexual Offences (Northern Ireland) Order 2008 aligns closely with the legislation of England and Wales: https://www.legislation.gov.uk/nisi/2008/1769/article/70. No equivalent statutory law exists in Scotland, where indecent exposure falls under common law.

[36] In English law, intention requires a victim.

[37] In Chapter 5. I problematize the confusion, in dominant ideology, between intentionally-violent 'flashing', non-intentionally-violent exhibitionism, and rape or sexual assault. I suggest there that nudity, in fact, has very little to do with *any* of these behaviours properly understood, as widely agreed in academic and psychological literature.

Aside from section 66 of the Sexual Offences Act 2003 ('indecent exposure'), there are other legal provisions that might, in theory, be used to prosecute nudity: namely, Sections 4A and 5 of the Public Order Act 1986, and the common offence of 'Outraging Public Decency'. Yet in practice, these do *not* prohibit passive nudity either.

Sections 4a and 5 of the Public Order Act 1986 are broad, non-specific offences that cover 'intentional harassment, alarm, and distress' and 'harassment, alarm, and distress' respectively[38]. Like the Sexual Offences Act, Section 4a targets situations where nudity is employed to cause *intentional harm to a victim*. It is broader than 'indecent exposure' in that it is applicable to exposure of non-genital body parts – including showing one's buttocks ('mooning') with the intent to offend. But again, it does not criminalize the exposure of body parts in itself – only the intention to cause alarm, harassment, or distress to a specific victim.

Section 5 replicates section 4 but without the requirement of intentionality. This means that it could, in theory, be used to prosecute someone whose nudity causes alarm or distress, even without any intent to do so. However, applying Section 5 in this way would conflict with the more specific and recent provisions of the Sexual Offences Act 2003, as well as with the official guidance from the Crown Prosecution Service and the College of Policing[39]. In practice, Section 5 is used only for genuinely disorderly behaviour – and perhaps in situations where someone refuses to dress after repeated complaints (though even this would depend on whether the complaints are deemed reasonable, so as not to violate the general right to be nude).

The common law offence of 'Outraging Public Decency', while benefitting from the inherent vagueness of common law offences (Leggatt, 2024), does not apply to passive nudity either. It is typically used to prosecute public sex acts deemed exceptionally lewd, obscene, or disgusting. Under English law, statutory law takes precedence over common law. This means that common law offences cannot be invoked to criminalize conduct that is expressly

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[38] https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1986/64.
[39] https://www.cps.gov.uk/legal-guidance/nudity-public-guidance-handling-cases-naturism, Appendix A.

permitted by statute. Since the Sexual Offences Act explicitly protects the right to passive nudity (see Appendix A), common law cannot be used to override that right.

In short: in England, the reason people do not walk around naked is not because it is illegal.

Other countries take varied approaches to public nudity. Some – like the Scandinavian countries and Spain – follow the English model. Others explicitly prohibit nudity, particularly in the post-colonial world (see Chapters 3 and 6 on nudity and coloniality). Still others prohibit 'offensive' or 'indecent' behaviour without clearly defining what these terms mean. In my native Italy, for example, the law prohibits 'obscene' behaviour in public ('*atti osceni in luogo pubblico*'[40]), but without defining 'obscenity' – it vaguely refers to the average person's moral outlook. Nevertheless, such vagueness is rarely tested in practice because, as in England, *nobody* walks around naked (additionally, such 'obscenity' is merely a civil wrong; it only becomes a crime if children are likely to be nearby).

The situation is similar across most of the Western world. In the United States, laws vary by State. California's indecent exposure statute, like England's, only criminalizes nudity when it is motivated by the intent to shock or for sexual gratification[41]. In contrast, Hawaii and New Hampshire criminalize nudity wherever it is likely to offend or cause alarm – regardless of intent[42]. The matter is further complicated by the absence of federal laws against nudity, meaning that public nudity is technically permitted on federal land[43]. But these legal inconsistencies are not practically significant, since casual public nudity is unthinkable everywhere – and therefore rarely needs to be policed.

So, if clothedness is not demanded by law – at least not in England – what is it that makes public nudity so thoroughly prohibited? In what follows, I begin to investigate the historical and ideological character of the Western prohibition of nudity.

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[40] Art. 726 of the Penal Code
[41] California Penal Code 314.1.
[42] Hawaii Revised Statutes 707-734, New Hampshire Revised Statutes 645:1.
[43] Https://www.boondockersbible.com/knowledgebase/is-nude-camping-legal-on-federal-lands/.

4. A brief history of the prohibition of nudity in Europe

It is difficult to say *exactly* how and when nudity become indecent, shameful, and prohibited in European societies. This cultural development took place thousands of years ago and we have limited documentary evidence of it. However, there is general agreement among historians, sociologists, and anthropologists about what happened. In his *History of Sexuality*, Foucault suggests that social and public nudity gradually became less socially acceptable during Roman times, and it was eventually prohibited as Christianity established itself as the official religion of the empire. Sociologist Barbara Górnicka tells a similar story, indicating that nudity was largely unproblematic in classical Greece[44] but became less common in Roman times – for example, people started wearing light tunics at the gym (2016: 122).

In ancient Mediterranean societies, around the time of classical Greece and before, clothing served decorative and protective purposes, as well as signalling status. Nudity was not prohibited or shameful. On the contrary, it was the norm for activities like bathing or exercising. For some, nudity was a choice for religious or philosophical reasons. Diogenes the Cynic famously lived naked in the middle of Athens and while his choice was considered a bit peculiar, it was not considered as odd as some of his other behaviours (cf. Diogenes Laertius, 1931).

More significant changes occurred when Jewish and early Christian customs began to spread and influence Roman society. According to archaeologist Stefanie Hoss, nudity had always been considered shameful in Judaism:

> 'Somebody who is naked is at least ridiculous in Judaism; at worst he or she loses his or her "honour". Seeing the nakedness of social superiors (e.g. Ham seeing the nakedness of his father Noah) is a humiliation for the superior and forbidden,

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[44] In Ancient Greece it was considered dishonourable and shameful for male citizens to expose their glans penis in public. The same custom also applied to Etruscans and Romans: 'The Greeks, Etruscans, and Romans, appear to have been accustomed to cover the foreskin with the kynodesme (a band), or the fibula (a ring), as custom and modesty demanded that the glans should be concealed' (Havelock, 2013: 22). Anthropologist Hans Peter Duerr explains that, for this reason, Jews who wanted to participate in the Olympics games of Tyros 'were only allowed to participate if they had their foreskins replaced. There were special operations for this, as the physician Galen reported' (in Jacoby, 1994: 12).

punishable act for the inferior. Wearing a garment meant "having a status and standing in the world", and being naked meant none of that' (205: 12)

Judaic rules against nudity led to tensions with the Roman conquerors. Jews objected to the Roman practice of mixed bathing in public bathhouses. Jewish theologian Michael Satlow describes ancient Judaism's attitudes towards nudity as similar to our contemporary Western views. He explains that male nakedness was offensive to God and primarily tied to questions of social status. Female nakedness, on the other hand, must be understood within the context of male/female power dynamics, due to its perceived sexual value for men (cf. 1997: 440). Over time, the Romans gradually adopted these Jewish and Christian perspectives on the naked body. As Christianity became the official religion of the Empire and pagan communities became marginalized, nudity became less common.

Like Christianity, Islam also adopted Judaism's ideas of body shame and its prohibition of nudity. Islamic views on nudity are even more strict. According to Islamic rules,

'total nudity is very strongly advised against, even when one is "alone"; this is because absolute solitude does not exist in a world in which we share existence with the djinns and angels' (Bouhdida, 2012: 38).

According to historian Alexandra Cuffel (2009), when the first Muslims arrived in Southern Europe, they were disgusted by the mixed nude bathing that still took place in Italian and Spanish public bathhouses.

The practice of mixed naked bathing in public bathhouses gradually declined in Europe during the Middle Ages and mostly vanished by the Renaissance. Modesty meant that people washed less frequently, and when they did, they found ways to cover themselves from the view of others. Górnicka connects the gradual disappearance of nudity from European public spaces to the slow but inevitable disappearance of pagan communities, who had managed to coexist with the Christians while leading vastly different lives (cf. 2016: 128). Regardless, over time social and public nudity became unthinkable for Europeans. It became 'a disgraceful sight', as Nietzsche ironically says in the above-quoted aphorism, and 'forbidden

under the severest penalties' as observed by Thoreau. In public spaces, nudity remained only permissible in art, where images of naked 'goddesses' (and, sometimes, 'gods') and bathing scenes became common for their power to arouse titillation (Nead, 1992).

The inconceivability of nudity in European society led European missionaries and conquerors to label peoples who were unashamed of their naked bodies as 'animals'. When Charles Darwin encountered the Yaghan people, living naked and without shame, in his 19th-century travels, he wrote:

> 'Viewing such men, one can hardly make oneself believe that they are fellow creatures placed in the same world. It is a common subject of conjecture: what pleasure in life some of the less gifted animals can enjoy? How much more reasonably it may be asked with respect to these men' (Darwin, in: *Yaghan's, Explorers and Settlers*: 12-13).

And again:

> 'How little can the higher powers of the mind come into play: what is there for imagination to paint, for reason to compare, for judgment to decide upon, to knock a limpet from the rock does not even require cunning, that lowest power of the mind. Their skill, like the instinct of animals is not improved by experience…' (ibid.)

This short history of the prohibition of nudity in Europe from antiquity to modernity suggests its origin as a religious prohibition that originated in ancient Judaism and spread through Christianity and, to a lesser extent[45], Islam.

However, notwithstanding the uncontroversially Christian/Abrahamic roots of our clothedness (to which I return in the next chapter), many refuse to see the prohibition of nudity as a Christian/Jewish/Islamic rule. In fact, most people endorse it and happily comply with it while not identifying as Christians/Jews/Muslims – or as 'religious' at all. They

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[45] The spread of Christianity has had greater impact than Islam because Christians have conquered and colonized more of the world.

suggest universal clothedness it is a matter of 'common sense', or 'natural', or otherwise 'obvious'.

In this study, I am not interested in ascribing the prohibition of nudity to a particular faith group, which people may or may not identify with. My aim, instead, is to establish its *religious character*, in the broad sense of Durkheimian sociology. This religious character is implied, I suggest, in the very perception of clothedness as commonsensical, 'natural', or 'obvious'. I understand the prohibition of nudity as part of a religious framework which has moved on from its Christian roots to become foundational to today's global 'secular' world (Taylor, 2007).

In what follows, I suggest that the 'secular' prohibition of nudity in the modern Western/Westernized world has a religious character – regardless of any particular faith one may or may not identify with – and therefore I propose to understand compliance and non-compliance as governed by the affective forces that *in general* produce compliance with religious rules and limits, as discussed by Durkheim and by his followers.

5. On the religious character of the prohibition of nudity: Émile Durkheim

I am going to suggest that the prohibition of nudity in our modern Western social order has a profoundly *religious character*. By stressing the religious character of the prohibition of nudity, I set it apart from other customs whose social function is less foundational, and which are therefore easier to challenge. I highlight the symbolic nature of the prohibition of nudity to make sense of the powerful psycho-social forces that enforce the prohibition while also making it *invisible*. I conclude with a discussion of *shame*, the affective (physiological) mechanism that ensures compliance with the norms defining belonging to one's social group.

First, I clarify what I mean by 'religion'. In common parlance, when people speak of 'religion', they usually refer to specific religious denominations, such as Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, etc. However, as noted above, in today's globalized secular world order, the boundaries between religious and secular norms have often blurred. Furthermore, Westerners

proud of their secularism and 'reason' are often blind to the religious character of many of their beliefs and only see 'religious beliefs' in the Other. They perceive their own cultural/religious beliefs as 'rational choices'. It is a central contention of mine that the prohibition of nudity in the Western/Westernised world is a religious phenomenon, in Durkheim's sense, and understanding the *affective* nature of the religious bond – or societal compliance with its norms – is key to exploring the possibility of non-compliance.

In *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, Durkheim notes the etymology of the term 'religion' as deriving from the Latin '*religare*', which means 'to bind', or 'to bond' – religion is that which binds or bonds a social group together[46]. For Durkheim, God[47] and the shared beliefs and rites (practices) of a religion serve to bind or bond a society together. Religion is the system through which a society organizes and orders itself – its *symbolic order*. Looking at various religious practices from across the world, Durkheim observes that this ordering is always based on a foundational, underlying *division* of the world into two classes of things: 'sacred' and 'profane'. 'Sacred' things are prohibited, set apart from the rest and forbidden, only to be accessed in special circumstances and according to specific rules. 'Profane' things are the rest: all the things that can be freely touched, encountered, and used.

Crucially, profane things must be kept separated from sacred, prohibited ones:

> 'The real characteristic of religious phenomena is that they always suppose a bipartite division of the whole universe, known and knowable, into two classes which embrace all that exists, but which radically exclude each other. Sacred things are those which the interdictions protect and isolate; profane things, those to which these interdictions are applied and which must remain at a distance from the first. Religious beliefs are the representations which express the nature of sacred things and the relations which they sustain, either with each other or with profane things. Finally, rites are the rules

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[46] As Hegel before him, according to a tradition that comes from Augustine and from the early Christian philosopher Lactantius (cf. *Divinae institutiones*, IV, 28). However, this etymology remains controversial. Another tradition of thought, originating in Cicero, derives the Latin *religio* (hence the English religion) from *relegere*, 'to read again', hence 'to consider carefully'.

[47] God is a symbol which represents the unity of a society, but there *are* godless religions too, such as Buddhism (cf. Durkheim, 1964: 29 ff).

of conduct which prescribe how a man should comport himself in the presence of these sacred objects'. (1964: 40)

In short, he defines religion as a:

'unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say, things set apart and forbidden – belief and practices which unite into one single moral community'. (1964: 47)

I suggest that the status of the naked body and of naked corporeality (in Western societies) must be understood as *sacred* in the sense of Durkheim. The naked human body is set apart from the normal, everyday profane life. In my normal life, it is forbidden ('*taboo*'), 'dirty', and can only be accessed through special rites.

Obeying a society's religious prohibitions is the condition for belonging to it, and thus religion binds – and bonds – a society together. Members organize their social and public life according to the same religious prohibitions and follow the same rites in accessing the sacred. I suggest this is true of our societies' prohibition of nudity, too. Vice versa, those who do not follow those rules are excluded from the social whole: 'A sacrilegious person is excluded from the society of the faithful' (1964: 409). A 'single moral community' is produced through this exclusion/inclusion dynamic[48].

Durkheim challenges Kant's view that people construct a 'single moral community' through their use of 'reason'. For Kant, reason enables people to agree on shared and universal moral rules, which organize their communal social life. However, the nature of Kantian 'reason' remains unclear. I noted above Nietzsche's criticism that our individual 'reason' is a product of the social and power relationships that have constituted us in the first place[49]. Durkheim's analysis of religion goes to a similar point. In stressing the social nature of our reason (of the categories that structure our thinking), he argues for the primacy of a socially-constructed

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[48] Foucault discusses of how madness, criminality, and perversion are used to exclude and discipline non-conforming individuals, creating an orderly, moral community (see below).
[49] Cf. Chapter 1, section 2.

symbolic order over any individual use of reason – he sees social life as the 'source for the logical life' (1964: 432). Durkheim speaks of 'religion' to stress the pre-reflective and primitive[50] nature of the ordering of the world[51].

Whereas many post-Enlightenment modern Europeans see themselves as 'rational', 'autonomous' individuals, Durkheim argues that ultimately our 'autonomous' individual reason is dependent on a *prior* symbolic ordering of things to which we are *emotionally* attached – *because it signifies and represents our belonging to our society*. Thus, Durkheim also defines religion as the

> 'system of ideas with which the individuals represent to themselves the society of which they are members, and the obscure but intimate relations which they have with it.' (Durkheim, 1964: 225).

Any order is complex and multi-layered. Whereas some people may perhaps see themselves as belonging to only one 'religion', Durkheim thought of social relationships of belonging as more complex. Religions are the symbolic (ideological) orders that structure societies, thus individuals have as many religions as societies they belong to. People belong to smaller and larger communities at the same time, and each come with their own ideological systems, which overlap and coexist. As a thought exercise, one might perhaps try to imagine an isolated, 'primitive' society, that has constructed its own religion as its ideological totality[52]: yet Durkheim is adamant that such isolated societies have never really been the norm:

> 'Neighbouring tribes of a similar civilization cannot fail to be in constant relationship with each other. As they meet each other, men naturally become conscious of the moral relationship which united them'. (1964: 426)

Neighbouring societies develop a similar social organization, similar rites, and so on:

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[50] In a logical and ontological sense.
[51] Similar arguments can also be found in the works of contemporaneous neo-Kantian philosopher Ernst Cassirer (Cf. 1955, 1965, 1992).
[52] 'The concept of totality is only the abstract from of the concept of society' (Durkheim, 1964: 442).

'Mutual loans and treaties result in reinforcing these spontaneous resemblances… The particular social life thus created tends to spread itself over an area with no definite limits.' (ibid.)

This is even truer in today's globalized and highly interconnected world. Societies do not have clear boundaries; ideological ('religious') totalities, likewise, are not discrete entities. As noted above, nudity is prohibited in *essentially* similar ways across the globe[53]. Durkheim describes how religious *taboos* (and related rites) spread across societies. This may have happened to the prohibition of nudity, which over time commerce, imperialism, and technological advances have made into a global norm.

In what follows, I highlight aspects of the prohibition of public nudity in our society[54] which suggest it is religious prohibition. First, I explore in some detail the structure of the prohibition, its *taboo* nature. Second, I refer to its *obviousness*. Third, I discuss how non-compliance is sanctioned through social exclusion. Fourth, I introduce *shame* as the affect that ensures our pre-reflective compliance.

6. The 'taboo' of public nudity. Danger, dirt and transgression

In my normal, everyday life, I must remain clothed[55]. The clothes I wear separate my naked body from the 'normal' world – they make it dis-appear, as if it were not there[56]. In the pub where I am sitting right now, in the library where I was this morning, in the café where I had lunch earlier, my naked body must remain hidden away. It is set apart, prohibited, incompatible with the profane world – just like Durkheim's *taboos* (religious prohibitions) are.

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[53] With the only exception of a few isolated communities (in the Amazon and Andaman Islands).
[54] Or: *societies* – see above.
[55] Although there are rules establishing appropriate clothing in different circumstances, here I focus on the fundamental principle of wearing clothes.
[56] The prohibition applies to covering and hiding specific body parts, such as my genitals and buttocks, as well as anything that people would perceive as 'nudity'. State laws attempt to define nudity, but the social prohibition is based on the symbolic notion of nudity itself, not specific body parts. Definitions and limits cannot be precise due to the symbolic nature of nudity.

Its taboo nature means that, in the everyday world, my naked corporeality is dangerous and *dirty*. If I were to appear naked in public, people would be *afraid*. But why? What would they be afraid of? Durkheim would understand this fear as the peculiar fear induced by sacrilegious encounters with the sacred. Such encounters are fear-inducing because of the risk of punishment and disorder they may bring about (1964: 300). These fear-inducing yet ultimately unexplainable 'dangers', are implicit in the notion of 'dirt'. In *Purity and Danger: An analysis of the concepts of pollution and taboo*, Mary Douglas develops Durkheim's work and argues that dirt reveals the presence of a symbolic system – of an ordering structure of religious nature:

> 'Where there is dirt there is a system. Dirt is the by-product of a systematic ordering and classification of matter, in so far as ordering involves rejecting inappropriate elements (1996: 36).

An object is dirty when it is out of place, according to the established symbolic order of things – as in the example of a shoe, which can be 'clean' on the floor yet 'dirty' on the dining table. Danger arises when this order is breached. Dirt, danger, and fear serve to protect the religious, symbolic order of things from the threat of disorder – from the sacred mixing with the profane.

Dirt is not only dangerous, but also highly contagious. When touching the sacred, ritual cleansing and other precautions are prescribed to reduce the risk of contagion:

> 'What makes those precautions necessary is the extraordinary contagiousness of the sacred' (Durkheim, 1964: 317)

A good example is perhaps the rite of washing our hands after peeing or pooing. Not only are bathrooms and toilets organized as separate ('sacred') spaces, but also, we must cleanse ourselves prior to returning to the profane space. One morning, needing to pee while walking

across an industrial estate, I just peed by the roadside. My friend Marcello[57] was disturbed by the fact that I could not wash my hands after peeing, which therefore remained 'dirty' after touching my penis. I said I had had a shower[58] before leaving home – and my penis had remained inside my clean[59] underwear since then. Therefore, I reasoned, my penis was very clean: surely cleaner than my hands, which had been touching all sorts of things. Rather than washing my hands after touching my penis, I argued, perhaps I should have washed my penis after touching it with my dirty hands. However, such arguments are hopeless because of the symbolic (religious) nature of 'dirt'[60]. The naked body and especially our genitals are 'dirty' in our profane, everyday life – because of their *taboo* nature. They are 'dirty' because they are out of place, dangerously disorderly[61] – in Douglas' words, 'dirt is essentially disorder' (1996: 2).

It is not just our genitals that are dirty: the words used to describe them are 'dirty' too. Durkheim and Douglas emphasize the *contagiousness* which is a peculiar characteristic of the 'dirt' connected to religious phenomena (cf. 1964: 322-4, 1996: 3-5). The sacred is *by its very nature* contagious: the words used to signify dirty things are themselves dirty; the words used to describe our naked body are themselves sullied by the dirt they represent. Words can be dirty[62], and thus dangerous, to the extent that they also threaten the separation between sacred and profane and thus the symbolic order of the world.

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[57] Names changed for anonymity.

[58] Is the morning shower (or any form of body washing) a ritual cleansing to transition from the sacred space of the bedroom to the profane world? Similarly, washing the face before bed can be seen as a ritual cleansing to transition from the profane world to the sacred one.

[59] 'Clean' as in 'washed'. In fact, one could question the sense in which clothes that have been worn are 'dirty'. Does our body's smell or sweat makes clothes 'dirty'? Why? Is washing clothes after wearing them different from other ritual washings of items that have touched bodies? Anyway, this discussion is beyond the scope of this work.

[60] Douglas compares ideas of dirt in our societies with ideas of ritual pollution in supposedly-'primitive' societies. She asks: 'Are our ideas hygienic where theirs are symbolic? Not a bit of it: I am going to argue that our ideas of dirt also express symbolic systems and that the difference between pollution behaviour in one part of the world and another is only a matter of detail' (1996: 36).

[61] Similar examples abound. Trying clothes on in a shop without underwear, I was criticized for sullying them. reason, of course, is that my penis sullies anything it touches. On reflection, this is nonsense: my penis was freshly showered, whereas the clothes on sale on the racks are regularly touched by the dirty hands of countless shoppers who flick through them.
Similarly, the jeans I am wearing now have touched many surfaces since I left home this morning, yet most people would touch them without feeling the need to immediately wash their hands. Instead, my freshly-showered penis hasn't touched anything, and yet people would surely rush to wash their hands after touching it.
[62] Why do we tell our children that certain words are 'dirty', and we teach them not to use them?

There are special occasions when my naked corporeality stops being 'dirty': when it is in its appropriate place. The sacred only appears 'prohibited' from a profane standpoint. When I am in bed having sex with my partner, in our '*sacred space*', my genitals are 'clean'[63], whereas clothes would feel 'dirty'. Many years ago, I attended a 'sacred sex' workshop where one participant (presumably having misunderstood the sort of event they had signed up for), insisted on wearing underwear in our newly established 'sacred space'. In that sacred space, their underwear felt 'dirty' in a way highly reminiscent of how people often think of naked genitals in the profane world. Saunas (in Central/Northern Europe) are another example of 'sacred' spaces where nudity is welcome – and swimming costumes are prohibited because 'unhygienic': that is, 'dirty'.

Communal practices of *transgression* are important in binding and bonding a society together. Transgressing together confirms social belonging – and not transgressing (when one is expected to) produces social exclusion. On Europe's beaches the prohibition of nudity is (partially) lifted and some nudity is expected. In the rite of getting (partially) naked together, clothed people are out of place. I interpret in this sense the attitude some Europeans take towards bathers wearing 'burkinis' – the burkini-wearer refuses to join in the communal act of transgression and is therefore outcasted as a result. Similar examples abound. Skinny dipping, for example: I can recall several occasions when I went for a quick naked dip with friends, yet someone in the group kept their swimming costume on. The experience of skinny dipping produces an exhilarating feeling of togetherness in the group, and those who remain clothed exclude themselves.

To be sure, experiences of transgression are always momentary – *exceptional* events. They are the proverbial exception that proves the rule. In an essay on George Bataille, Foucault wrote:

> 'Transgression incessantly crosses and recrosses a line that closes up behind it in a wave of extremely short duration, and thus it is made to return once more right to the horizon of the uncrossable' (1998b: 73).

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[63] No sexual partner has ever expressed the need to wash hands after touching genitals in a sexual context.

As soon as the transgressive experience (e.g., the encounter with nudity) is over, the sacred limits are restored with their full force. It is as if they had never been crossed. The possibility of transgression does not entail that the limit (the separation) is any weaker. On the contrary, the very notion of transgression and the rites required for it to happen reinforce the limit and its profane uncrossability. For example, I may have been naked with friends in various circumstances in the past (skinny dipping, festivals, saunas, etc.): yet when we meet again for dinner tonight, most certainly none of us will consider getting naked. The fact that we have seen each other's naked bodies in the past remains like a distant dream-like memory from a different dimension. The limit has closed, and nudity is now, again, prohibited. Transgressing the separation of sacred and profane in inappropriate ways or circumstances, when the time is not right, is a dangerous threat to social order.

These features of the prohibition of nudity – its *taboo* nature, the dirtiness of our naked corporeality, its contagiousness, and modalities that regulate transgression – highlight a profound resemblance with Durkheim's discussion of religious phenomena. In the next section, I discuss Louis Althusser's view that a central feature of the rules that protect our symbolic ('ideological') order is their 'obviousness'.

7. On the 'obviousness' of the prohibition of public nudity

In my experience, obviousness is a striking feature of the prohibition of nudity. In my normal everyday life and in the public domain (mass media, political debates, etc.) I have *never* heard *anyone* questioning our society's prohibition of public nudity[64]. Perhaps most people truly never question the legal, societal, and cultural obligation imposed upon them to wear clothes – or perhaps they do but keep quiet about it. In my own experience, people regularly think I am crazy when I seek to problematize the fact of our enforced clothedness[65]. To them, there is nothing worth discussing: it is 'obvious'. Reflecting on the assent-inducing authority of the ideological order, Douglas wrote:

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[64] Except for other naturist activists.
[65] Outside of naturist contexts.

'Culture, in the sense of the public, standardized values of a community, mediates the experience of individuals. It provides in advance some basic categories, a positive pattern in which ideas and values are tidily ordered. And, above all, it has authority, since each is induced to assent because of the assent of others. But its public character makes its categories more rigid' (1996: 40).

The apparent 'obviousness' of *our own* ideological order contrasts with the (equally apparent) questionability of *others'* ideological orders. Periodically, in the Western press, there appear articles and campaigns supporting the struggle of women in Islamic societies who demand the freedom to expose their hair[66] in public. Most Westerners support those struggles: people should be free to expose their hair if they so wish, they say. However, when I suggest a parallel between demands for the right to expose one's hair and demand for the right to expose *any other* body parts, people regularly dismiss my suggestion as absurd – even offensive. Apparently, it is 'obvious' to anyone with any sense that there is an essential difference between the right to expose one's hair and the right to expose one's nipples, genitals, or buttocks – or so I am told. But is the issue really that different? Is it really that 'obvious' that nipples/genitals/buttocks *must* remain covered, whereas hair/face/arms/legs can be freely exposed? What is so 'obvious' about it? Other than one's own cultural position, what makes it 'obvious' that certain body parts can be exposed, and others cannot?[67]

In my opinion, this 'obviousness' points to its very opposite – to an arbitrary rule that cannot be 'rationally' justified (due to its arbitrariness), but which is *too fundamental* to be openly questioned.

In his classic essay *Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses*, Louis Althusser presents a notion of 'ideology' which largely overlaps with Durkheim's 'religion', or with similar notions of symbolic order. Althusser defines ideology as the *materially existing* (that is, embedded in practices and social rituals) 'representation of the imaginary relationship of

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[66] Or face, or other body parts.
[67] And I wonder: do people genuinely reflect on the problem, or do they just say what they feel they are expected to say, or repeat what others are saying?

individuals to their real conditions of existence' (1994, 123)[68]. He introduces the category of 'obviousnesses' and suggests that obviousnesses are important because they indicate the presence of ideological structures. Obviousnesses, he says, are ideological effects:

> 'It is indeed a peculiarity of ideology that it imposes (without appearing to do so, since these are "obviousnesses") obviousnesses as obviousnesses, which we cannot fail to recognize and before which we have the inevitable and natural reaction of crying out (aloud, or in the "still, small voice of conscience"): "That's obvious! That's right! That's true!"' (1994: 129).

When asked to think about public nudity, most people's usual reaction is: 'we cannot/ should not be naked! That's obvious! That's right! That's true!'. Only mad or disturbed people could question our everyday clothedness. In academic literature, only a handful of books and articles have been written on the topic of nudity – and even those tend to discuss nudity or nudism as a curiosity[69] rather than seriously posing the political and philosophical question of our clothedness. When I give academic talks on the topic of the prohibition of nudity, audiences frequently shift the discussion towards the *meanings* of clothes people wear – or they mention naturism: it seems almost impossible to engage people in serious conversations about the existing legal/societal/cultural obligation to wear clothes in public.

Following Althusser, I interpret most people's perception that our society's prohibition of nudity is 'obvious' as an ideological effect. As an 'obviousness', clothedness plays an important role in confirming individuals' sense of their place within their society – for this is precisely what Althusser thinks ideology is. A society – for Althusser, as for Durkheim – is bound together and bonded (symbolically and practically) through its members engaging in material practices and material rituals which are the material manifestation of their (often

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[68] This definition mirrors Durkheim's definition of religion as 'system of ideas with which the individuals represent to themselves the society of which they are members, and the obscure but intimate relations they have with it' (1964: 225). Such system of ideas is embedded in the material practices and rites of a society. Althusser explicitly discusses religions as instances of ideologies and uses examples of religious ideologies to illustrate his ideas.

[69] For example, *A Brief History of Nakedness* by Philip Carr-Gomm (2013).

implicit) belief in their society's ideology[70]. For this bond to be effective, the ideological operation of binding must remain invisible. The religious/ideological rituals which members of a society universally share must appear to them as 'obvious', so that they do not see them for the religious rituals they are.

Still, despite all the above, in a society, there always remains the risk that someone may question the alleged 'obviousness' of its norms, practices, and beliefs. One way in which societies protect themselves against such threats is by reminding individuals of the dangers attached to *taboos* and transgressions. Douglas noticed the role of danger-beliefs, which

> 'are as much threats which one man uses to coerce another as dangers which he himself fears to incur by his own lapses from righteousness' (1996: 3).

However, fears of 'dangers' may not be enough to deter transgressors and freethinkers. Arguably, as many theorists have suggested, much more powerful in ensuring individuals' compliance is the fear they may be excluded from their society/community: that is to say, *shame*.

8. Protecting the religious order: the function of shame as individuals' internal compliance mechanism

When I am seen naked by another, my most immediate reaction is one of *shame*. Already in my childhood, I was ashamed of exposing my naked body. At school, I was ashamed of showing my naked body to my school friends. My shame was so extreme that I was ashamed of my nudity even at home, in front of my parents who had birthed me and changed my nappies. I do not think I was exceptional in this[71] – like me, many people are ashamed to be seen naked even by their parents. And yet: what am I (and what are *we*) ashamed of?

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[70] The subject's 'ideas are his material actions inserted into material practices governed by material rituals which are themselves defined by the material ideological apparatuses from which derive the ideas of that subject' (1994: 127).
[71] Exceptions apply (e.g., I do not feel any shame in being seen naked by my partner), the intensity of shame varies with individuals and cultural differences, etc. Yet, the general point is uncontroversial.

The connection between nudity and shame runs so deep in the Western psyche that people rarely ask *why* they are ashamed of their nudity. Already in Roman times the genitals began to be referred to as *pudenda*: 'that of which one ought to be ashamed'. With the development of Western anatomy in early modernity, the term *pudenda* became the official name for the genitals[72]. Some may suggest that body-shame is caused by the unrealistic beauty standards promoted by our societies: but this is patently false, because all children learn to be ashamed of their bodies at a young age, well before beauty standards become a factor and regardless of how far/close they are to such beauty standards[73]. As children grow into adults, body-shame is felt by all regardless of their 'beauty'[74]. Others say that shame at being seen naked is rooted in 'human nature': I mentioned above the surprise of European missionaries at encountering peoples who lived naked and unashamed.

Personally, when it comes to nudity, the affective experience of shame is the main factor that makes me comply with the societal prohibition of nudity. *A posteriori* justifications and rationalization only serve to cover over the basic fact that, in my everyday life, I cover my body first and foremost because I would be ashamed of being seen naked[75]. I believe it is the same for many other people, too.

Although, the connection between shame and nudity is (arguably) specific to societies that prohibit nudity (thus natives were 'naked and unashamed'), feelings of shame are – in general – central to psycho-social processes of community binding/bonding and social compliance. Writers agree that shame is the affect that makes individuals mirror the behaviours of those around them and, therefore, comply with the norms of their community. Through threatening and defining shame, groups establish their identity and enforce or seek to enforce desired behaviours (Stearns, 2017: 1). There is extensive experimental evidence in support of the

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[72] In the late 20th century, the term was used only for female genitalia, and was removed from the *Terminologia Anatomica* only in 2019. However, related terms such as 'pudendal nerve' are still used (Draper, 2020).

[73] Psychologist Gershen Kaufman says shame when naked in front of others 'takes root in late childhood, somewhere around eight years of age. At exactly this point, being naked with others becomes a source of shame' (Kaufman, 1996: 45)

[74] Generally, young (often conventionally-attractive) people are more affected by shame than older individuals.

[75] In my experience, what deters me is the shame of behaving inappropriately (being naked where I shouldn't be), rather than the shame of being seen naked. I cannot speak for others, or how these experiences of shame relate to each other. Anyway, the outcome is the same: shame prevents public nudity.

claim that shame successfully inhibit the transgression of social norms (Tangney and Dearing, 2002: 130). Shame ensures that community members pre-reflectively – *affectively* – respect their society's norms and *taboos* (public nudity is a particular instance). Leading psychologist of shame Gershen Kaufman writes:

> 'By alerting us to misconduct or wrongdoing – to transgression in whatever form – shame motivates necessary self-correction' (1989: 5) [76]

Continuing psychologist Silvan Tomkins' seminal work on affect theory, according to which affects are the 'primary innate biological motivating mechanisms' (ibid: 12), Kaufman focusses on shame as the affect whose function is to ensure individuals bind/bond together in communities. Shame makes us feel separate from the rest of the community, and inferior:

> 'we feel fundamentally deficient as individuals, diseased, defective. To live with shame is to experience the very essence or heart of the self as wanting. Shame is inevitably alienating, isolating, and deeply disturbing.' (ibid.: 18)

In the experience of shame, we feel a rupture in the social relationship. We feel our belonging is under threat – and we feel 'a longing for reunion': 'we feel divided and secretly yearn to feel *one*, whole' (ibid.: 19).

9. Shame: the social bond in Durkheim's religious phenomena

In *Shame and the Social Bond*, sociologist Thomas Scheff argues that shame is the 'social emotion' that provides the social bind/bond described by Durkheim:

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[76] There are discussions on the difference between shame and guilt (and embarrassment, humiliation, shyness, self-consciousness, etc.). According to a traditional view, shame is about 'who one is' while guilt relates to something one has done. On this view, guilt is less painful, and it can be repaired through apologies and not repeating the wrong act. Shame exposes the inadequate nature of the self and is more painful and harder to repair. Embarrassment is a milder form of shame (cf. Stearns, 2017: 3ff., Tangney and Dearing, 2002: 10ff.). Kaufman (1989, 1996: 41ff.), however, argues that shame and guilt are the same affect.

'I propose that shame is the emotion that Durkheim should have named as the social emotion.' (Scheff, 2000: 97)

For Scheff, shame is the psycho-social emotion that signals the poor state of our social interconnectedness: shame is an indicator of social disconnection (whereas, conversely, pride signals connection, 2014: 131). Scheff traces this idea to psycho-social theorists Charles Cooley and Ervin Goffman – in Goffman's words, shame is 'not an irrational impulse breaking through socially prescribed behaviour, but part of this orderly behaviour itself' (2000:93). It motivates individuals to regulate their social behaviour according to the expectations (real or perceived) of others, in such a way as to avoid a shame response.

Shame, as a bodily and/or mental response to the *threat* of disconnection from others, does not require the actual presence of those others. It can equally occur 'in the interior monologue in which we see ourselves from the point of view of others' (ibid.: 95). Additionally, shame motivates individuals to regulate/conform their behaviour not only because of the experience of shame but also, more frequently, due to its anticipation:

'Shame figures in most social interaction because although members may only occasionally feel shame, they are constantly anticipating it.' (ibid: 97)

The experience or anticipation of shame motivates us to mimic the behaviour of our peers and friends, of social classes we aspire to belong to, and of any social group we seek to be a part of. In my youth, shame motivated me to dress like my friends[77]. Even as an adult, though I got better at hiding or denying it, shame has been driving much of my social behaviour and choices. Shame is the fear of appearing different from our social group – for that difference[78] makes us feel exposed, inadequate, inferior, and at risk of rejection:

'It is virtually impossible to be different, particularly in this culture, and not feel deficient for the difference, because any awareness of difference inevitably translates

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[77] Simmel argued that fashion is driven by shame (1957).
[78] Not all differences are equally significant or problematic.

into a devaluing comparison. First we are devalued by others, and then we devalue ourselves' (Kaufman, 1996: 6).

Thus, shame is the affect that motivates us to mimic other individuals around us – to blend with the rest – to ensure our belonging. That is why, presumably, I am only ashamed of being naked when among clothed people. Shame – the feeling of distress for being different/separated from the herd – dissipates quickly as soon as I am with naked people, in naturist spaces.

Recent research in neuropsychology supports such views. Tomkins' work on affect theory has been confirmed by contemporary experimental studies in affective neuroscience, which have identified a number of subcortical brain systems that produce our various affective experiences. Ken Davis and Jaak Panksepp, who are at the forefront of these studies, say that

> 'Our subcortical brain produces affective responses to the situations we are in almost-instantly, automatically and without any conscious analysis or effort. (2018: 3).

Panksepp believes he has identified seven separate brain systems that produce affective experiences – he calls these systems 'seeking', 'rage', 'fear', 'panic', 'lust', 'care', and 'play'[79] (ibid.: 7). Experiments suggest that those brain systems – the physiological/subcortical reactions (and the resulting affective experiences) – are common to all of us mammals (ibid.:127 ff.), even though of course what triggers a given subcortical reaction in different individuals (and in different species, of course) changes. In other words, although the feeling of fear does not change, of course what triggers it does, both among species and among individuals of the same species. Our affects are *mammalian* instinctive responses, which both influence and are influenced by our experiences, knowledge, memories, and meaning-making processes:

> 'Our primary emotions with their built-in affects and reaction tendencies can be thought of as birthright survival systems. In urgent survival situations, they move us

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[79] Panksepp capitalizes the name of brain systems to indicate he is referring to the brain system and not the common emotion by the same name (cf. 2018: 4).

to react in ways that have worked effectively for countless generations of ancestors. In less urgent situations they still bias our perceptions and actions, generate both constant and coherent streams of thoughts, and add values to and meaning to our experiences through the positive and negative feelings they generate' (ibid.: 9).

According to Davis and Panksepp, shame (and its relatives: pride, guilt, embarrassment, humiliation, etc.) is the affect activated by the 'panic' system. The panic system generates the feeling of psychological distress/pain in infant mammals who are separated from their mothers/carers. In older individuals, it is responsible for what the pioneer psychologist William McDougall called 'the gregarious instinct': the distress mammals experience[80] when they are separated from the herd. This pre-reflective and unconscious neurological pain/sadness/panic/distress we experience when we feel separated from our herd (social group) is, on this view, what we experience as 'shame' (ibid.: 59-60).

The pain produced by the activation of this subcortical brain system ('shame') motivates individuals to correct or co-regulate their behaviour so as to be re-united with the herd or social group. In this way, Davis and Panksepp propose a neuropsychological theory of herd behaviour, which bypasses conscious reflection and analysis. This view is endorsed by psychoanalyst and neuroscientist Mark Solms (2002), too. If this is right, then perhaps religions and ideologies merely provide the intersubjective norms, values, and meanings around which individuals congregate together to minimize the pain/distress caused by activations of their panic system[81].

Thus, perhaps, the reason for the present universal clothedness of human societies is to be found in our mammalian neuro-psychology[82]. Perhaps, our desire to belong is our mammalian instinct to come together in bigger groups, where we feel safer and stronger. If this is right, attempts to disobey the social norms that hold groups together – beginning with the prohibition of public nudity – have to confront our pre-reflective, 'gregarious' instinctive reactions.

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[80] The physiological system is common to all mammals.
[81] I find this approach both plausible and interesting.
[82] Nietzsche writes: 'psychology is once again the path to the fundamental problems.' (BGE 23)

People are generally unaware of the neuro-psychological processes underlying their perceptions and actions: 'the deference-emotion system is virtually instantaneous and invisible' (Scheff, 1988: 396). Especially in today's Western societies, which ostensibly place great value on 'individualism', people are reluctant to acknowledge the instantaneous and invisible shame reactions that make them pre-reflectively align with the herd, and which colour any subsequent conscious reflection. Perhaps this is the reason for the widely discussed 'shame about shame' observed by many psychologists and sociologists:

> 'One thing that makes shame so crippling is that it usually feels impossible to talk about, to express openly in words. That's because of the inevitable shame *about* shame. Simply revealing our shame, and thereby exposing the way in which we feel lesser, deficient, or inferior, can actually cause us to *reexperience* the very shame we long hide, disown, or anesthetize.' (1996: 4)

Over time,

> 'We learn to deny the existence of shame – so we fail to recognize shame for what it is' (ibid.: 15). [83]

Given that

> 'shame has historically functioned as the principal agent of social control by partitioning the acceptable from the unacceptable' (Kaufman, 1996: 67),

our inability to recognize our own shame reactions makes us unable to appreciate how social control happens. The centrality of shame in the experience of nudity is so obviously significant – both in my experience and in Western society – that I begin my attempt to

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[83] Shame is not just a motivator to respect *taboos*: it is 'taboo' itself. Kaufman writes: 'American society is a shame-based culture, but here shame remains hidden. Since there is shame about shame, it remains under taboo. The taboo on shame is so strict in our culture that we behave as if shame does not exist. That taboo must be lifted' (1989: 47). See also Scheff (2014) on the same topic.

disobey the prohibition of nudity by recognizing the central role of shame in enforcing my own clothedness, and that of others too.

10. Excluding difference as 'madness', 'criminality', 'perversion'

Above, I named shame as the main factor that stops me from being naked in public. To be sure, aside from my own shame reactions, there is also an external system of societal sanctions designed to discipline individuals who, like me, might consider refusing to conform. In his work, Foucault proposes that modern disciplinary societies have constructed the categories of madness, criminality, and perversion in order to exclude and punish disobedient individuals. Significantly, those refusing to obey the prohibition of nudity are triply excluded and punished as – at the same time – mad, criminals, and perverts.

One way society deals with them is by painting them as 'mad'. Stephen Gough, the 'naked rambler' who walked across the United Kingdom refusing to wear clothes to protest against the prohibition of nudity, was routinely portrayed in the press and to the public opinion as a laughingstock. He became the subject of a TV documentary, *Absolute Mad Lads: The Naked Rambler*. The documentary was promoted with lines such as:

> 'The Naked Rambler: the man who did nearly a decade in prison because he liked the breeze on his balls'[84].

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[84] https://twitter.com/countdankulatv/status/1137526146466295813?lang=gl

Fig. 4 Absolute Mad Lads:
The Naked Rambler
(2019)

To paint someone as 'mad' is to exclude them from society; thus, potential threats to the order are made into outcasts. Foucault, in *Madness and Civilization*, argues that modern disciplinary societies have consistently used 'madness' to ban difference and dissent. Those who dare to think and act differently are deemed 'mad'. Until not long ago, they used to be locked up in mental asylums, their 'madness' (refusal to conform) justifying their physical exclusion from society[85]. It is very easy to imagine that someone refusing to accept the prohibition of nudity would have been a prime candidate for reclusion in a mental institution.

In the West, mental asylums have gradually been closing over the past few decades. The idea that those who think differently – abnormally – must be physically removed from society is now seen as wrong: these days, most 'mad' people are being drugged instead of being locked away. Physical removal from society, however, remains in use for those who are deemed to pose *too* serious a threat to the social order. Such individuals are categorized as 'criminals' and locked up in prisons. Stephen Gough, as the documentary makers derisively noted, was locked up *in prison* for nearly a decade, his 'madness', presumably, deemed too dangerous for society[86].

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[85] This is still the case in much of the non-Western world, cf. Vinci (2016).
[86] Since the closure of mental asylums, prisons in the West have largely doubled as mental asylums.

There are many similarities between constructions of 'madness' and 'criminality'. In *Madness and Civilization* and in *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault tells compelling stories about the parallel genealogy of mental asylums and prisons – of 'madness' and 'criminality'. Both were, essentially, Christian institutions for curing sick souls[87] (Foucault, 1991, 1989h). The history of 'sicknesses of the soul' is for Foucault the history of how modern disciplinary societies deal with dissent and difference. Non-complying individuals – 'mad' ones and 'criminals' – are excluded from society. Thus, *normalized* society is bound/bounded together through the exclusion of alternative possibilities of being, thinking, and acting. In Foucault's words:

> 'We are becoming a society which is essentially defined by the norm', or 'a society of normalization'. (1989h: 197)

Overlapping with ideas of madness and criminality is the notion of 'perversion'. Foucault argues that perversion, too, is a modern invention – one introduced to normalize sexual behaviours (1998a). Perversions are 'abnormal' sexual practices; like madness and criminality, they are symptoms of a sick soul. The figure of the pervert combines features of the madman and the criminal: the pervert is more than just 'mad' because of the threat he[88] poses to society, and worse than a common criminal because his behaviour poses a particularly serious threat to the moral order. Therefore, perversion usually warrants the severest of punishments[89]. The pervert is the ultimate outcast[90].

Madness, criminality, and perversion are three ways – perhaps the three main ways – in which modern Western disciplinary societies exclude ways of being that are perceived as threats to the social order. Foucault understood these 'rituals of exclusions' as modern society's apparatus to ensure its members are 'safe, ineffective, socially and politically castrated' (1989j: 69).

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[87] Christian-inspired Victorian institutions (mental asylums, prisons, but also workhouses, etc.) sought to cure 'defective souls' through prayer, work, routine, and asceticism (see Chapter 4).
[88] Rarely 'she'.
[89] Disproportionately long sentences are usually given to sex offenders due to this common belief.
[90] Even in prison, perverts have a lower status than common criminals. Within prisons, 'perverts' are usually segregated in dedicated high-security wings. Many inmates believe perverts deserve much harsher punishment than prison – and beat them if they can.

Crucially, in our society, *public nudity is prohibited and excluded as – at the same time – madness, criminality, and perversion*. He[91] who gets naked in public is immediately assumed to be mentally disturbed, he is also criminalized for 'indecent exposure'[92], and he is seen as a pervert (an 'exhibitionist', or a 'flasher', and often a 'paedophile'[93]) too. This triple indictment shows how serious a threat our society considers nudity to be: not only is it unthinkable to question it, but those who do not comply are triply banned, disciplined, punished. Respectable society thus unites in quiet compliance with the 'obvious' prohibition of public nudity.

It may be tempting to read Foucault's analyses of madness/criminality/perversion as technologies of social exclusion as describing an external disciplinary system designed to intervene when shame fails to ensure social control. To some extent, they are – those judged to be 'mad', criminals', or 'pervert' are indeed jailed or otherwise dealt with. However, those in jail are only a small proportion of the population: more broadly, ideological constructions of madness, criminality, and perversion work as powerful reminders to everybody else of the dangers of disobeying. It is the *fear* of being seen as mad, criminal, or pervert that obtains the obedience of the masses. The invisibility of one's 'soul' and thus the impossibility of proving one's own sanity or honesty against the opinion of psychiatrists or juries entails that the only way for people to prove their 'sanity' or 'honesty' is by conforming. Thus, 'sane' and 'honest' individuals are those blending in with the herd – whereas those who dare to stand out risk being picked and singled out for punishment (Foucault, 1989h: 196).

Seen in this way, there is a clear similarity between the social exclusion of madness/criminality/perversion and my previous discussion of shame. It is the *fear of being*

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[91] The pronoun is deliberately gendered. It is predominantly male nudity which is seen as evidence of criminality and perversion. In the collective imagination and public discourse, flashers and perverts are men (a naked woman in the streets would probably be assumed to be drunk or mentally ill). Certainly, predatory men in patriarchal societies sometimes weaponize their penises – but is there something *inherently* violent about male genitals and about men?

[92] In many legal systems public nudity is automatically 'indecent', but the UK law on indecent exposure does not automatically criminalize public nudity.

[93] I discuss in Chapter 5 my adventures riding my bike naked in England. Many passers-by took my nudity as evidence of me being a 'paedophile' and/or endangering 'children'. People have justified physically assaulting me with their moral duty to protect 'children' from 'perverts' (see also post-postscript).

seen as different that produces our compliance. The main psychological motivation to conform is the fear of what might happen to us if other people see us as 'different'. Psychiatrist R. D. Laing, talking about people's fear of being seen as 'abnormal', observed that

> 'What most people are frightened of is other people. We are frightened of each other. And we have got good reason to be frightened of each other because we can see what happens to any of us when other people have got the chance to do us in. They do us in' (1989i: 168).

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have started to lay down the preliminary theoretical interdisciplinary framework that will guide me in attempting to disobey the prohibition of nudity. I do not intend to prove the 'truth' of the preliminary theoretical picture I have sketched – this is just my own 'map', on which I will rely to make sense of what I encounter in my adventures.

I have suggested that the prohibition of nudity in our modern Western society has a *religious* nature – in the Durkheimian sense that it binds and bonds a society together. I suggested that our 'prohibition of nudity' is in fact a complex system of religious separations and rituals that relegate our naked corporeality to a 'sacred' space. It is part of the symbolic order of things through which people organize their world: which explains its invisibility. Compliance is required for membership in the society; non-compliance exposes individuals as 'different' and threatens them with loss of belonging, which is the experience of shame. Being ashamed of being seen naked is normal in modern Western societies. Constructions of madness, criminality, and perversion are particular, powerful ways in which Western societies exclude and shame individuals.

In the next chapter I will continue this discussion of modern Western societies' technologies of exclusion (hence of shaming), and of the central role the prohibition of nudity plays in them. Like all religious norms, the prohibition of nudity serves at the same time to provide

share norms around which a group can define its identity *and* to distinguish insiders from outsiders. The core set of criteria around which Western societies unite their members and exclude others is represented by the ideal of disembodied 'humanity' which first appears in *Genesis* and which, refined by Christian theology, imposed by the Church, and secularized by modern humanism, is still implied in the everyday material practices and rituals of today's Western society. Human nudity is prohibited/shameful because humans cannot afford to expose their animality, on the denial of which their relative positions of power/safety within 'human' society are predicated.

Chapter 3: Humanism: the production and shaming/exclusion of 'animality'

'We're all born naked, and the rest is just drag'
(RuPaul, 2018)

Introduction

In my everyday social and public life, I am always clothed. The mere thought of exposing my body in public fills me with shame. Although I would love to normalize my nudity[94], shame prevents me from doing so, well before any considerations of external constrains. However, in naturist spaces, among other naked individuals, most people find that they are not ashamed of their nudity anymore – once nudity becomes normal, it stops being shameful.

Naturists are not shameless. Their perceived shamelessness stems from the fact that in naturist spaces, nudity ceases being inappropriate – interestingly, *clothed people* often feel shame in naturist spaces, because their clothedness suggests non-belonging. Like everybody else, naturists feel shame in relation to anything they perceive as socially inappropriate: notably, sexuality can feel shameful in naturist spaces (this is significant: to make nudity socially acceptable, Western naturism has emphasized the exclusion of sexuality. I will return to this later). There is nothing inherently shameful in nudity. Therefore, the question I seek to address here is: *why did nudity, of all things, become shameful* (in Western cultures)*?*

In this chapter, I build upon the previous chapter's discussion of the Western prohibition of public nudity as a *religious* phenomenon, enforced by the danger-fears and ideological

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[94] Indoors and in warm weather.

constructions of 'obviousness' that are typical of religious rules. Following Durkheim, I defined religion as the system of ideas/rules/rituals by which individuals represent their relationship to their society. I suggested that *shame* – the painful feeling aroused by fears of loss of belonging – plays a crucial role in ensuring compliance with the religious order of society. Now I delve deeper into the religious bond of Western societies. I examine what's implicit in our practice of mandatory clothedness. I trace the prohibition and shaming of nudity to the creation myth of Judaeo-Christianity[95] and to Judaeo-Christian *humanism* (or *human exceptionalism*: I consider these two terms to be substantially equivalent[96]).

Humanism is the foundation of Christianity. This is explicitly stated in the early pages of *Genesis*, although it may not be apparent to readers who consider human exceptionalism to be 'obvious'. Humanism posits the ontological difference between 'humanity' and 'animality' – and humanity's superiority, *of course*. It presents an ideal of 'humanity' as disembodied and free from unruly desires – especially sexual desires. It grants 'humans' the divine right to rule over the 'animals', thus providing the theological basis for a hierarchical order of the world where 'more disembodied' means 'more powerful'. The post-Enlightenment secularist turn has retained this theological/metaphysical framework, only thinly disguising its Christian origins. People's 'human' identity depends on their perceived disembodiment and ability to control their desires. Individuals who are deemed 'mad', criminals, or perverts – those with 'faulty' wills, at the mercy of their desires and instincts – are considered *like* animals.

In what follows, I suggest that society's requirement to be clothed is closely tied to the humanist separation between 'humans' and 'animals'. In Christianity and other Abrahamic cultures, clothing is a symbol of humanity. Our relationship to clothes is our relationship to animality (to non-humanity). Thus, compulsory clothedness is fundamental to the metaphysical and political order of the Western world, which is based on the dominance of

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[95] This also applies to Islam.

[96] Many disagree. Humanist Jennifer Hancock proudly claims that humanists value 'humanity' and its capacity for morality, rejecting the idea that they hold speciesist beliefs in human superiority (https://humanisthappiness.blogspot.com/2014/04/human-exceptionalism.html). I don't see how attributing to humans a 'capacity for morality' unknown to non-human species is meaningfully different from claiming human superiority – however, an in-depth analysis of humanism vs. human exceptionalism is beyond the scope of this work.

'humans' over 'animals'. We feel ashamed of our nudity because it exposes our inherent animality – it challenges the human exceptionalism on which our social belonging, identity, status, power, and safety depend. Catholic theologian Erik Peterson says that:

> 'The question of the relationship of the human person to clothing is basically not a moral concern, but a metaphysical and theological one' (1993: 561)

This chapter is organized as follows. I begin with a close reading of the beginning of *Genesis* (section 1). Then, I discuss how Christian theology uses clothing to distinguish humanity from animality (section 2) – and how the Christian doctrine of the flesh deepens this divide (section 3-4). I suggest that the foundational, metaphysical separation between humanity and animality carried over from ancient Christianity into modern Western humanism (sections 5-6). I then focus on how Western humanism justifies the socio-political hierarchical order. I propose that humanism justifies the domination over any 'animalized' others (sections 7-8) and establishes a sliding scale of humanity that determines the order of humanist societies (sections 9-10). Finally, I reflect on Agamben's claim that the separation between humanity and animality permeates our individual selves, leading us to hide/fear/be ashamed of our own 'animality' (section 11).

1. Nakedness: prohibition and shame in Genesis

Disclaimer: Many people react with outrage when I suggest that their clothedness is a religious phenomenon of Judaeo-Christian/Abrahamic origin – that their shame around nudity is the affective reaction that prevents them from disobeying a religious prohibition. Proud of their 'individual reason', non-religious identity, and capacity for critical thinking and morality, they reject my views as nonsensical and accuse me of dismissing them and their perspectives. I acknowledge these upset responses and understand that many are offended by my critique of their ideology/religion. The perspective I adopt here is my own,

and it may not apply to many others, whose world and experience may be very different from mine[97].

I was born and raised in Italy – a Catholic country, though few Italians still identify as religious[98]. Few Italians attribute their clothedness to the Bible, but I believe this is because of the invisibility of ideological/religious beliefs I discussed above. I was taught from a young age to be ashamed of my nudity – my atheist parents would never accept that this shaming was part of a religious education they unintentionally gave me, yet I fail to see how the prohibition/shame of nudity stated in the first pages of *Genesis* could be unrelated to the prohibition/shaming of nudity in the culture I grew up in.

Italian scholar Giorgio Agamben argues in essay *Nudity* that 'nudity, in our culture, is inseparable from a theological signature' (2011b: 57). Not only is the biblical prohibition of nudity which the God of *Genesis* imposed on humanity still in force – essentially unchanged – but also, the *meaning* we attribute to clothedness (and nakedness) remains tied to the theological characterization of clothedness and nakedness in Christianity. The story of the Fall is well-known. In the beginning, God created human beings in his own image, so that humans may rule over all other creatures:

> 'God said, "Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness, so that they may rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky, over the livestock and all the wild animals, and over all the creatures that move along the ground"' (Gen 1:26, also cf. Gen 1:27-28).

Initially, God had placed Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden and brought all the other creatures to them to rule over (Gen 2:19). The only rule God had set for humans was that they not eat from the tree of knowledge of Good and Evil, or else they would lose their divine immortality (Gen 2:17). In the Garden of Eden, Adam and Eve 'were both naked, and they

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[97] However, dismissing people's beliefs hence upsetting them is unavoidably part of any genuine critique of ideology/religion. How can I critique ideological beliefs if I accept them at face value?

[98] Almost none of my Italian friends identifies as Christian. However, radically rejecting the Christian roots and structure of our worldview is easier said than done, and often people merely rename their cultural beliefs. I suspect the popularity of Marxism in Catholic countries is due to its fundamental similarity to Christianity (see Camus, 1953).

felt no shame' (Gen 2:25). However, as soon as Adam and Eve eat the fruit of the forbidden tree,

'the eyes of both of them were opened, and they realized they were naked; so they sewed fig leaves together and made coverings for themselves' (Gen 3:7)

Their newly discovered nakedness makes them feel ashamed, and they try to hide from God's sight. In Adam's own words, addressing God, he says:

'I heard you in the garden, and I was afraid because I was naked; so I hid.' (Gen 3:10)

As a punishment, God banished humans from the Garden of Eden. This is the beginning of humankind as we know it – humans are condemned to lives that include pain, toil, and mortality. However, before banishing humans from the Garden of Eden,

'God made garments of skin for Adam and his wife and clothed them.' (Gen 3:21)

Thus, from the beginning, in the Judaeo-Christian myth, clothedness and shame for their nakedness are the marks of postlapsarian humans.

2. Clothedness and nakedness in Christian theology

The prominence of the prohibition and shaming of nudity in the Judaeo-Christian creation myth and the significance of God's imposition of clothes on humans are lost on many people I speak to in my everyday life. They protest that the meaning they give to their clothedness has nothing to do with an ancient (and nowadays perhaps almost forgotten) Biblical 'fable'. I once gave a conference talk, in which I discussed the myth of the Fall and suggested its significance to the modern Western custom of clothedness. One participant felt particularly offended and protested that he had never read the Bible and does not believe in it. He went on to suggest that I stop wasting time with Christian theology and instead carry out 'serious research' on the 'real reasons' why nudity is prohibited in our secular societies.

And yet, modern Western societies seem unable to conceive of nudity as a normal, positive state – not just as the result of occasional undressing, or as a protest, or as titillation, or as something to laugh at or be afraid of. Although very few[99] are willing to trace societal ideas about clothedness/nakedness to Christian[100] doctrines, I believe that a genealogy of the cultural meaning of clothedness in Christian Europe helps to bring to the surface metaphysical ideas around clothedness/nakedness that still underpin our modern everyday world, regardless of whether one has read or 'believes' in the Bible. Too often, Westerners' belief in their secularism and critical thinking allows religious ideas to flourish, unchallenged and unrecognized for what they are.

In this section, I make sense of the biblical prohibition/shamefulness of nudity through a discussion of the Christian theology of clothedness (and nakedness), as presented by Catholic theologian Erik Peterson in his classic work *A Theology of Clothes*[101]. I then follow Agamben in suggesting that the modern Western concept of nakedness remains a secularization of the theological (Christian) one – and this secularized theological concept still underlies the political order in Western societies. Peterson's discussion of a Christian theology of clothes focusses on the biblical myth of the Fall:

> 'The natural starting point for theological reflection on the connection between man and his clothing can only be the biblical account of the Fall' (1993: 560).

The biblical myth is open to diverse interpretations[102]: yet, on crucial points, there is general agreement among commentators.

First of all, we cannot underestimate the importance of notions of clothedness and nakedness at the core of the founding myth of humankind. The relationship between man and God, and

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[99] Of the few who even considered the problem.

[100] My focus is on Christianity, but the same can be said of Judaism and Islam.

[101] Peterson's influential work on clothedness is considered the starting point for other authors (Kim, 1998; Brock, 1999; Agamben 2011b; Covolo, 2017).

[102] And has indeed been interpreted in many different ways: see below.

the change in this relationship from prelapsarian to postlapsarian state, is described in
Genesis through clothing imagery. Peterson notes that

> 'At first sight, it may appear as something distinctly "external" that, after their Fall,
> Adam and Eve should seek to cover their nakedness with fig leaves. It appears
> "external" and incongruous that man, after sinning against God, after committing the
> most appalling deed of which he is capable, should find no other answer than making
> himself clothes!' (1993: 563)

However, upon reflection, we realize that man's reaction of covering himself with clothes is
not incongruous. On the contrary, it reveals the fundamental place that clothes (and
nakedness) occupy in Christian theology and in the social world built around that theology.

Second, Peterson points out that nakedness only appears *after* the Fall:

> 'prior to that, there was indeed unclothedness, but this lack of clothing was still not
> nakedness. Nakedness certainly presupposes lack of clothing, but it is not identical
> with it. The realization of nakedness is connected with the spiritual act which
> Scripture calls the "opening of the eyes". Nakedness, therefore, is "noticed", while the
> earlier lack of clothing remained unnoticed.' (ibid.: 560)

The 'opening of the eyes', Peterson says, points towards a metaphysical change that affected
human nature – the naked *flesh* had now appeared:

> 'only now could the body be seen in its full corporeity, including its sexuality' (ibid.).

Given that there is general agreement among Christian theologians that Adam and Eve's
bodies *already had* sexual organs prior to the Fall[103], Peterson says there must have been
some sort of 'stripping', 'uncovering' of the body:

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[103] Otherwise, how could have they multiplied? (Cf. Gen 1:28, Foucault, 2019, Augustine, 1998: xiv, 23)

'This uncovering of the body, manifesting its "naked corporeality" this pitiless exposure of the body and of all the marks of its sexuality, now visible to the "opened eyes" as a consequence of the first sin, can be understood only once it is accepted that what came to be "uncovered" was "covered" prior to the Fall, and that what was now revealed and undressed had previously been concealed and clothed' (ibid: 561).

The theological explanation for the apparently curious fact that Adam and Eve's prelapsarian bodies were both clothed and unclothed at the same time – 'naked' yet unable to see their nakedness (their naked corporeality, their *flesh*) – is that prior to the Fall they were 'clothed' in divine glory:

'This "non-nakedness" of the body, along with its unclothedness, is explained by the fact that supernatural grace covered the human person like a garment. Man did not simply stand in the light of the divine glory; he was actually clothed with it.' (ibid: 561).

In the Garden of Eden humans' clothes were 'supernatural righteousness', 'innocence', and 'immortality'. And thus,

'the revelation of bodily nakedness is always, simultaneously, a revelation of the lack of righteousness, innocence and immortality' (ibid: 562).

The stripping of humans, the uncovering of their naked corporeality and decaying and corruptible flesh, which appears once the divine glory has been taken away, is the cause of their shame and requires them to cover up with clothes:

'Corruption must necessarily be kept hidden, and a cloth of some kind spread over decay.' (ibid: 562).

After the Fall, thus, clothes become necessary to conceal humans' naked corporeality (their sexuality, in particular), decaying flesh, and, more broadly, the loss of the quasi-divine status they had enjoyed before. The prelapsarian clothes of glory were the mark of humans' 'special

relationship' to God. They were the sign that humans had been made in God's image (Gen 1:26-1:27), and thus entitled them to rule over all other creatures (Gen 1:26-1:28, 2:19). Once humans' clothes of glory have been taken away, what appears is not some original 'nature' but the *lack* of divine grace:

> 'the forfeiture of the garment of divine glory exposes not his "unclothed" nature, but his nature as "stripped", the "nakedness" of which becomes apparent in "shame"'. (ibid: 563).

Therefore, the problem with nudity is what humans' nudity reveals about their relationship with God – and with grace. In Agamben's words:

> 'The problem of nudity is, therefore, the problem of human nature in its relationship with grace' (2011b: 60)

A corollary of this is Christianity's inability to conceive of nudity in a positive sense. Peterson notes that man's original nudity *presupposed* the clothing of grace:

> *'he was created in this unclothed nature so that he might be clothed with the supernatural garment of glory'* (1993: 563, italicized in the original),

Nakedness as a state (as opposed to a *momentary* stripping of clothes) is thus 'impossible' in Christianity. Humans were never naked – and cannot be naked without immediately feeling shame. This is why as soon as humans lose their garment of glory, they must replace it immediately with clothes. Man, as God's favourite creature, was created *without* naked corporeality, *without* flesh, *without* corruptible and decaying bodies. It was created clothed (by grace) and must remain clothed (by textiles). Clothes are an *essential* part of what humans are – of their quasi-divine nature. In Peterson's words: 'The common saying, "clothes make man", hides a deep theological meaning' (ibid.: 562) – for unclothed humans are not *really* humans.

Thus, Agamben notes that Christianity only has a 'negative' conception of nakedness – as a temporary lack of clothes or divine glory – and remains incapable of comprehending nudity as a positive state:

> 'We can therefore only experience nudity as a denudation and a baring, never as a form and stable possession. At any rate, it is difficult to grasp and impossible to hold on to.' (2011b: 65)

To be sure, the myth of *Genesis* had been interpreted in (more or less) different ways in early Christianity prior to the dogmatic intervention of the Church. Syriac scholar Sebastian Brock, in *The Robe of Glory*, discusses Peterson's interpretation. While agreeing on Peterson's interpretation being the established one in Christian theology, he also notes that in '*Genesis* 3 there is of course no mention of any "robe of glory" worn by Adam and Eve prior to the Fall' (1999: 248). In fact, he remarks that ancient Christian writers had given other, different interpretations of biblical nakedness, some of them not involving any prelapsarian glorious clothing.

Brock observes that the interpretation according to which the Fall involves the loss of the 'robe of glory' and its replacement with clothes, was the most common one across the Middle East[104] but less so among Greek and Latin writers. Whereas in the Middle East nakedness had long been seen as a loss of identity (and hence it had a cultural history of being socially inconceivable), in Europe there still remained traces of the classical Greek tradition, which celebrated nakedness as an aesthetic and philosophical ideal (Brock, 1999: 247). Thus, writers influenced by the Greek and Latin tradition could still conceive of prelapsarian nakedness as actual (positive) nakedness. The Fall had meant the loss of innocence and therefore clothes had *since* become necessary, whereas Greek and Latin interpreters could still conceptually conceive of naked humans. Be that as it may, Brock concludes that over time the Greek influence waned and the Semitic and Syriac interpretation won over, thereby

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[104] The term 'Middle East' is problematically Euro-centric, but I am using it as there still is no widely-used alternative available.

making nakedness as a positive state inconceivable, and thus impossible, in the new Christian world[105].

3. Nakedness and flesh in Augustine

Above, I noted that in Christian (Catholic) theology, nudity is only conceivable as a momentary and/or exceptional state of undress. This resonates with my experience of life in modern Western societies. Now I delve deeper into the *shamefulness* of nudity: why are we ashamed of our nudity? In my everyday experience, two major sets of reasons people give to justify shame around nudity revolve around the alleged 'ugliness' or 'imperfection' of bodies[106] and concerns about the impossibility to control their sexual desires[107].

Here, I continue the theological analysis to explore, through the writings of the Church Fathers, how and why our 'inglorious' bodies become 'shameful'. Although most people I speak to dismiss suggestions that their shame has anything to do with the writing of the Church Fathers as ludicrous or offensive, I find it highly significant that the main justifications for clothedness among my Western contemporaries remain essentially the same as in the Church doctrine. I believe secularized versions of these ideas continue to function not only in my native, Catholic Italy, but across Western societies[108]. Perhaps they work subconsciously – at the level of Fromm's 'social unconscious' (2006: 70ff.); if so, it may be useful to bring them to the surface, to see the work they do.

For Peterson, the revelation of our naked corporeality exposes at the same time *a)* our loss of divine grace – a 'less special' relationship with God, loss of righteousness, innocence, and

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[105] The difference between the ancient Semitic and Greek-Latin world reflects the difference in attitudes towards nudity among Jews and Romans.
Other interpretations of the myth of Genesis existed in the ancient world. A radically different interpretation of the myth of *Genesis* is to be found in Pelagius and among his followers. Pelagius did not accept that the Fall had caused humankind to lose God's grace. On this view, the necessity of clothing as a replacement for the lost glory would have been unclear – and arguably nakedness shouldn't be shameful. Pelagius' doctrine was rejected by the dogmatic orthodoxy of the Church, declared heretic, and abandoned.
[106] Both their own bodies and those of others.
[107] Both their own sexuality and that of others.
[108] I understand and accept that many find this suggestion offensive and insulting.

immortality; – and *b)* our *flesh* – a 'nature' which is corruptible and decays (it is 'ugly' and 'lacks any nobility'). Here, I delve further into the Christian notion of 'flesh' and on the ways in which it is inseparable from a certain idea of relationship with God. I seek to highlight how central the Christian doctrine of the flesh is to societies, customs, and institutions that have developed in the Christianized world. The writings of the Church Fathers in the late antiquity set out the orthodoxy of the Church, which shaped the European world in the centuries that followed.

First, regarding the loss of divine grace, a decaying body reveals one's mortality. The glorious bodies of prelapsarian Adam and Eve would have remained eternally young, whereas our ageing bodies show the signs of our graceless mortality. The peculiar shame that older people (in Western societies) feel in exposing their aging bodies probably has to do with this: we are ashamed because our aging and decaying bodies show that we are not as God-like (eternal, unchanging) as we imagine ourselves to be. Tellingly, shame towards aging bodies is characteristic of Western societies, whereas it was not the norm in pre-Christian and non-Christian societies (see 3.5 below). Today's booming cosmetic industry would have arguably been unthinkable in a non-Christian world without the connection between a decaying body and the lost grace. Similarly, clothes serve to preserve the illusion of a non-decaying body. The European cultural norms prohibiting older people from wearing revealing clothes (miniskirts, crop tops, etc.) are a variation on the same theme.

Second, the *main* issue for early Christian theologians and for later Christianity is sexuality. In the Christian world, the notion of 'flesh' and the shaming and prohibition of nudity are inseparable from a set of attitudes towards sexuality. I quoted Peterson saying that nakedness reveals a body 'including its sexuality' (1993: 560). This reflects a concern about nakedness revealing the signs of 'natural' (as opposed to 'glorious') sexuality which must be traced back to Augustine. Augustine was the most influential among the Church Fathers and the author of what became the Church's 'doctrine of the flesh'. In *The City of God*, he argued that the crucial difference between the prelapsarian and postlapsarian condition of man is the control he exerts over his[109] sexuality. Augustine believed that his clothing of grace meant

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[109] Augustine's analysis seems only concerned with *male* sexuality. It is unclear if he believed women had sexual desires or understood female sexuality. Prior to converting to Christianity, Augustine had a promiscuous

that prelapsarian man had full volitional control over his sexuality, whereas with the loss of grace human's sexual desires arose, which could rebel against the will. Before the Fall, humans

> '"were naked, and were not ashamed". This was not because they did not know that they were naked; rather, their nakedness was not yet disgraceful, *because lust did not yet arouse those members independently of their will*.' (1998: xiv,17)

The notion of 'lust' and its relationship with the 'will' is of crucial importance here. Early Christianity introduced the notion of lust as some sort of rebellion of the flesh against the will, which arises as a consequence of sin. Referring to prelapsarian men, Augustine states that

> 'in the garment of grace... their members did not know how to oppose their will.' (ibid.)

As humans lost their grace, they began to struggle with their sexual desires: 'there appeared in the movements of their body a certain shameless novelty, as a consequence of which their nakedness was made shameful' (ibid.). So, while in Paradise there would have been no

> 'conflict between lust and will; or, at least, the will would have been sufficient to control the needs of lust' (1998: xiv, 23),

the postlapsarian human condition is characterized by a perpetual conflict between sexual desire and will. This tension is evident in the sexual organs, especially in penises, which become erect. This arousal against the will is evidence that humans have become less God-like and more animal-like, ruled by instincts rather than will.

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sexual life and had been involved with both women (he had a son) and (most likely) men. Although there is no evidence of Augustine's same-sex promiscuous sex life (and thus some doubt it really happened, cf. Soble 2002), the understanding of sexual activity implicit in his theology seems consistent with a focus on male homosexual practices. Anyway, the complex relationship between the sexual experiences of the Christian clergy and their theological positions is not relevant to my discussion here.

It is significant that men who have never been to nudist spaces often ask what happens if they have an erection. This question regularly tops the FAQ list of naturist websites[110]. Of course, men cannot control their erections, yet many are still ashamed of their lack of control. They would rather cover their sexual organs than risk exposing their 'ungraciousness' and 'animality'.

Augustine writes that all sexual arousal is shameful and must be hidden because it is not under the control of the will. According to him, Adam and Eve in their prelapsarian state had full control over their sexual organs. They were capable of controlling their sexual organs in the same way as we can move our hands or feet. Without sin, humans would not have lost control over their sexuality and desires:

> 'the will would then have been served not only by the other members of the body, but also by the sexual organs. In that case, the vessel created for that purpose would have sown its seed upon "the field of generation" as the hand now sows seeds upon the ground' (1998: xiv, 23)

Instead, postlapsarian humans share the unruly sexual desire of animals. Augustine quotes *Romans* 7:23, saying, '*I see another law in my members fighting against the law of my mind*' (Sermon 151, 5). This relationship between sexuality, lack of control, and its implication for the relationship between humans and God is significant in Christianity. It forms the basis for its sex-negative attitudes.

4. Flesh and unruly sexual desires in the writings of the Church fathers

Augustine's doctrine of the flesh did not arise in a vacuum. In *Confessions of the Flesh*, Foucault carefully reconstructs the theological debates that led to the articulation of the Church's doctrine of the flesh. While Plato (like most of his contemporaries) only viewed

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[110] Source: https://www.bn.org.uk/news/information/youth/erections-and-naturism-r94/

excessive desires[111] as detrimental to virtue and therefore recommended temperance[112], early Christian theologians believed that sexual desires were inherently *evil*. For example, Foucault tells us that 3rd century writer Methodius of Olympus argued that 'desires of the flesh are evil' (*Symposium*, 2019: 169) – or at least *potentially* evil. Rejecting ancient temperance, early Christian writers maintained that humanity must obey the will of God. Sexual (fleshy) desires are beyond the control of the will and can turn people away from God. In fact, they may even be the work of the Devil, who uses the flesh as a means to lead people astray.

Early Christian writers proposed several techniques of self-analysis (e.g., confessional practices) to determine whether fleshy desires were truly the work of the Devil, and for cleansing oneself from such evil influence (e.g., penitence). However, due to the impossibility of conclusively discerning the influence of the Devil in one's sexual thoughts and desires, early Christian writers advised fighting against *all* fleshy desires. This gave rise to ideals of chastity and virginity. The life of a good (chaste) Christian thus became a 'fight', a 'war', a 'strenuous and constant struggle' against the desires of the flesh. In early Christian texts, the virgin is compared to 'a city under siege' or 'an athlete preparing for a fight' (ibid: 193-194).

Foucault explains that even for the average Christian, who is permitted to have sex with their spouse, the goal was to purify their will and soul from fleshy desires. In the words of Cassianus, it was 'to leave the flesh while remaining in the body' (ibid: 222). Augustine states in *De Bono Coniugali* that the primary purpose of marriage is not procreation but rather the elimination of sexual desire (ibid: 299-300). Other Church Fathers agreed: from John Chrysostom to Augustine himself, the main objective of marriage was said to be to 'avoid fornication, repress sexual desire, live in chastity', to 'extinguish the fire in us', and to

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[111] Including 'sexual' desires, which were not yet a separate category.

[112] Socrates explains in the *Phaedrus*: 'in every one of us there are two ruling and directing principles, whose guidance we follow wherever they may lead, the one being an innate desire of pleasure; the other, an acquired judgment which aspires after excellence. Now these two principles at one time maintain harmony, while at another they are at feud within us, and now one and now the other obtains the mastery. When judgment leads us with sound reason to virtue, and asserts its authority; we assign to that authority the name of temperance; but when desire drags us irrationally to pleasures, and has established its sway within us, that sway is denominated excess.' (Plato, 1927: 219)
This view remained predominant in pre-Christian Europe. Foucault (2019) noted that even later Stoics like Seneca and Marcus Aurelius held essentially the same position as Plato.

struggle together 'against the weakness of the flesh' (ibid: 251, 252, 297). This struggle against the desires of the flesh transforms the life of a Christian into an ongoing battle against the will, demonstrating their 'humanity'.

Those who give up the struggle are likely possessed by the Devil and have turned away from God. They have forsaken their humanity and become 'like animals'. To repress one's sexual desires, and to hide them by covering our bodies with clothes, becomes crucial in the Christian's struggle to maintain the appearance of prelapsarian, quasi-divine sexual control[113]. However, no matter how painful and difficult the inner struggle against sexual desires may be, humans' 'special relationship' with God and their essential difference from 'animals' crucially rely on this inner struggle.

I see the prohibition and shame often associated with public displays of 'unruly' sexuality as *still* a product of those Christian attitudes. The prohibition of nudity in Christianity stems from the misguided attempt to remain somewhat connected to a mythical prelapsarian state in which, unlike 'animals', humans were in control of their sexuality and/or experienced no lust. Postlapsarian clothing desexualizes the public space, thus controlling our unruly desires. Madness, criminality, and perversion are precisely the result of the inability to control desires, which is why they are excluded from God's humanity. Additionally, Western societies generally do not view the nudity of infants and pre-pubescent children as problematic because children are believed not to experience any sexual desires[114]. Children are still considered 'innocent', and do not have 'unruly' sexual desires, which is why they can be naked, much like Adam and Eve once were.

Naturists claim for themselves an 'innocent' ontological state comparable to that of Augustine's Adam and Eve and of children. Naturists can remain naked because they do not have unruly sexual desires. Even if they may have 'desires'[115], their practice of desexualized nudity proves that these desires are not 'unruly'. In this way, naturists are *endorsing* the

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[113] Clothes can do more than protect the appearance of modesty. They can also make the body less receptive to external stimuli and less aware of its surroundings, and thus less horny.

[114] This is true of sexual desire as experienced in Christian and post-Christian Western societies. However, there may be conflicting evidence in Puritan-influenced England and US. Anecdotally, some men are disturbed even by infants' nudity.

[115] In contrast to Adam and Eve and children.

ontological distinction between humans and animals found in Christian metaphysics and theology. They accept that what defines humanity is a quasi-divine capacity to control our carnal desires. They only reject the orthodox interpretation of the Fall, which suggests that postlapsarian humans need clothes to replace their 'garments of light' and thus ensure quasi-divine self-control. This is why expressions of sexual desire are frowned upon and shameful in naturist spaces: because they expose one's claim to belong to an 'innocent' (prelapsarian) humanity as a lie.

Were we to embrace and unleash our naked corporeality (our flesh, our unruly desires), the fantasy of our ontological difference from 'animals' (including mad individuals, criminals, and perverts) would crumble. By relinquishing our delusion of a special relationship with God and of a quasi-divine ontological status, we would also forfeit the privileged position of power we enjoy over 'animals'. In the next section, I discuss humanity's quasi-divine ontological status, while the rest of the chapter delves deeper into the intricate political implications of this quasi-divine status.

5. The Human and the Animal

A recent press image depicted 92 naked migrants at the border between Greece and Turkey (Fig. 5). Greek authorities, who accused Turkey of denuding the migrants, denounced the sight of the naked individuals as 'inhuman' (thus 'degrading'[116]). Greek minister Notis Mitarachi even referred to the nudity of the migrants as 'a shame for civilisation'[117].

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[116] The claim that humanity implies superiority is not hidden, unlike the infamous 'different but equal' doctrine.
[117] Source: https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/naked-migrants-greece-turkey-un-b2204082.html

Fig. 5 Naked migrants at the Turkish-Greek border

(What is the point of covering their genitals? Is it a way to assert their humanity?)

Similarly, stories frequently emerge in the press about migrants in Mediterranean countries being forcibly stripped, beaten, and subjected to treatments deemed 'inhumane' and 'like animals' by the police[118]. Although these descriptions may appear obvious, is the distinction between humans and animals truly so clear-cut? What defines a 'human', and what distinguishes humans from animals? And what constitutes a 'civilized human', and where do 'uncivilized humans' stand on the spectrum of humanity and animality?

Once again, the key to comprehending this problem is in the beginning of the Judaeo-Christian creation myth. *Genesis* establishes an ontological distinction between humans and animals, explicitly stated in its initial pages. Christianity's creation myth maintains that God fashioned humans separately and distinctly from animals. After populating the Earth with all other creatures, God created man with the intention that he was to be the ruler of the animals:

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[118] For example, https://www.hrw.org/report/2023/05/03/we-were-just-animals/pushbacks-people-seeking-protection-croatia-bosnia-and

'Then God said, "Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness, so that they may rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky, over the livestock and all the wild animals,[a] and over all the creatures that move along the ground".' (Gen 1:26).

Humans' position of power over animals is predicated on the ontological difference that separates humans from animals. Humankind has been created in God's image, whereas animals have not. Prior to the Fall, humans were immortal and clothed in light, like God[119]. The main difference between Edenic humanity and God was that humans did not know good from evil (cf. Gen 3:22); humankind acquired this knowledge from the forbidden fruit but then lost its immortality. Thus, according to *Genesis*, humanity was created in an intermediate state between God and animals, and it defines itself through this ongoing difference with God and animals. Implicit in this is God's status as the ideal towards which humanity must strive, and animality as the pole from which humanity must veer away.

However, aside from the biblical account, what does the difference between humans and animals *really* consist of? I suggested above that clothing plays a central role in Westerners' fashioning of their relationship with God, as a statement of their difference from 'animals'. Clothing replaces the lost divine glory and hides humans' decaying bodies. Clothes mark the difference between humans and animals: because animals do not wear clothes, are not ashamed of their bodies, and do not hide their bodies from each other[120]. Yet this is hardly an ontological difference: it is rather just a way to introduce the *appearance* of an ontological difference.

In *The Open*, Agamben traces a genealogy of the concept of 'human' in European thought. Outside of Christian theology, all he finds are straw-clutching attempts to justify the theological distinction between humans and animals which is so crucial to Christianity, but which has become increasingly problematic for modern science. Even Carl Linnaeus, the father of modern taxonomy, struggled to reconcile the Christian view with scientific naturalism. As a Christian, he accepted that

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119 'The Lord wraps himself in light as with a garment' (Psalm 104:2)
120 Certain other animals do briefly hide their bodies under leaves or as part of mating rituals, yet they do not *consistently* hide their bodies collectively *out of shame*, like humans in Christian/post-Christian societies do.

'Man is the animal which the creator found worthy of honouring with such a marvellous mind and which he wanted to adopt as His favourite, reserving for him a nobler existence; God even sent His only son to save him' (2004: 23)

However, as a scientist,

'I must remain in my workshop and consider man and his body as a naturalist, who hardly knows a single distinguishing mark which separates man from the apes, save for the fact that the latter have an empty space between their canines and their other teeth.' (ibid: 24)

For Linnaeus, humans' belonging to the natural world is evident from the fact that man is born naked ('*nudus in nuda terra*', ibid: 26). However, after their 'natural', animal-like birth, humans rise 'above' the rest of nature. Through learning and culture, humans become 'civilized' and thus achieve 'supernatural' status[121].

Along similar lines, others, like the French anatomist Xavier Bichat (cf. Agamben, 2004: 15) developed Aristotelian and Christian ideas suggesting that humans combine a 'lower', organic ('vegetative') life – which they share with the other animals – and a 'higher' relational life. While scientists can only study the organic dimension of human life, the supernatural, 'divine' – or should we say, truly 'human' – dimension of human existence is the subject matter of philosophy and of 'humanities'.

6. Secular humanism: the continuation of Christianity's political ontology

It is often said that with the Enlightenment, Europeans began to question Christian dogmas and 'irrational' beliefs. Science replaced dogma, and reason replaced faith – supposedly. However, the Christian distinction between humans and animals remained mostly unchanged.

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[121] *Of course*, not all humans achieve or can achieve supernatural status in the same manner; many humans remain at various stages of underdevelopment.

The Enlightenment's emphasis on 'reason' further separated humans from animals. Arguably, humanist 'reason' serves the same purpose as Christian 'will'. Both allow humans to transcend the realm of necessity and instincts – of 'animality'.

In Chapter 1, I discussed how Kant connects humanity and reason to ideas of freedom: our capacity for reason enables us to shape our world – reason makes us free (*Critique of Pure Reason*, A752/B780). This is, in essence, a rephrasing of the Christian belief that our distinctively-human will allows us to rise above our animality and exist in a 'free' moral world, where behaviour is not determined by 'instincts'. Arthur Schopenhauer famously compared Kant to:

> 'a man at a ball, who all evening has been carrying on a love affair with a masked beauty in the vain hope of making a conquest, when at last she throws off her mask and reveals herself to be his wife' (2005: 103)

Kant's masked wife was Christianity. According to philosopher John Gray,

> 'the upshot of Schopenhauer's criticism of Kant is that the Enlightenment was only a secular version of Christianity's central mistake… Philosophy has been a masked ball in which a religious image of humankind is renewed in the guise of humanist ideas' (2002: 37-41).

Secular humanism, which 'has not given up Christianity's cardinal error – the belief that humans are radically different from other animals' (ibid.)., still dominates the post-Christian, modern Western world. The biblical concept of humanity – the Christian notion that humans are radically different[122] from other animals – still underpins Western 'secular' humanism. Even people who no longer identify as Christians still generally believe in a radical difference between humans and animals, echoing the views of the Church Fathers. Gray writes:

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[122] And superior, of course

'Among contemporary philosophers it is a matter of pride to be ignorant of theology. As a result, the Christian origins of secular humanism are rarely understood' (2002: xii).

He is correct. Western discourses on 'dehumanization' – not only right-wing efforts to 'animalize' others but also left-wing 'humanitarian' discourses – are ultimately founded on the same (Christian) metaphysical construction of humanity. Those who argue that 'humans' should not be treated 'like animals', are complicit in the contemporaneous production and exclusion of 'animality' as the unavoidable remainder of their treasured 'humanity'[123].

In the remaining part of this chapter, I explore the role of nudity in articulating the distinction between humanity and animalit. I examine it along three different axes: first, I discuss the way in which the distinction between humans and animals has served to justify domination over all other forms of life and over 'lower' peoples. Second, I explore how the distinction between humans and animals produces a 'sliding scale of humanity' which underpins relations of dominations *within* Western societies. Third, I explore how these separations survive in a foundational separation between 'humanity' and 'animality' which cuts across the very being of those who identify as humans.

The Christian and humanist association of 'animality' with nudity-as-a-positive-state and with naked corporeality means that, to protect my human status and ensure my belonging to 'humanity' – to avoid the threat of 'dehumanization' – I must hide my naked corporeality. It is thus understandable that I am ashamed of my naked corporeality, for it shows the uncomfortable truth that I am not *that* different from the 'animals'. To protect my belonging to humanity and the relative power and safety that comes with being human, I must hide any similarities to 'animals'.

7. Nakedness and the politics of 'humanity': claiming superiority over the naked outsiders

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[123] This animal remainder is both projected onto others and exists inside all of us: see below.

In Daniel Quinn's novel *Ishmael*, the gorilla Ishmael explains to the human narrator that the myths in the beginning of *Genesis* were stories created to justify the political and territorial claims of the ancient peoples to whom those stories belonged. The stories and myths people tell themselves always have a political significance. The distinction between humans and animals, the belief that the world was created for humans to enjoy and exploit (Gen 1:26-1:28, Gen 2:8 -2:16), and the supposed 'special relationship' between humans and God should be understood as mythological narratives that justified a certain politics. Over the past few thousand years, the myths that separated humans from animals have served to justify the political claims to power over everything and everyone else by those who believed in those myths.

The gorilla Ishmael refers to the people who believed in *Genesis* as 'takers'. With their 'special relationship' with God and the belief that they had the right to rule over all the other creatures, the 'takers' asserted their ontological superiority and established a system of domination over everything and everyone else. In their language, the 'takers' refer to themselves as 'civilized'; in their system of knowledge, they perceive themselves as the highest form of life, believing that humans were created to rule the world, and that everyone else should either serve them or perish. Therefore, their distinction between humans and animals is *'the knowledge of who shall live and who shall die'* (ibid: 158).

European imperialism in the last few centuries led to unprecedented practices of domination and genocides. The Europeans were able to enslave and commit genocide against entire peoples due to their deadly technologies (guns, etc.) and justified their actions by incorporating them into their ancient mythological narratives – the stories they told themselves about who they were and who they were *not*. In stark contrast to their alleged 'humanity' and 'civilization', the Europeans considered those they sought to enslave or kill as 'primitives', 'uncivilized', and 'animals'.

One of the most obvious indicators of the ontological difference between European invaders and their victims – the natives – was the clothedness of the former as opposed to the nakedness of the latter. Trusting their Biblical myth, the Europeans believed their clothedness proved their divine origin, while the natives' nakedness was seen as evidence of their

animality. Darwin's comments on the nakedness of the Yaghan – quoted above – is significant in this respect:

> 'Viewing such men, one can hardly make oneself believe that they are fellow creatures placed in the same world' (see 2.3).

When Columbus made landfall in the Bahamas, on 12th October 1492, the very first thing he noticed was that the locals were completely naked. His journal entry for that fateful day is full of references to the locals' nakedness: as soon as they arrived, Columbus and his men 'saw naked people':

> 'they go as naked as when their mothers bore them, and so do the women' (in Olson, 1906: 110-111).

Although Columbus enjoyed the view ('They are all very well made, with very handsome bodies'), he also immediately inferred from their nakedness that they must have 'had no religion', hence they 'would easily be made Christians' (ibid.). Europe's enslavement and genocide of the naked primitives had started.

Fig. 6 Christopher Columbus landing in the Caribbean (16th century copper plate)

European explorers and missionaries found naked peoples in most (if not *all*) the 'new worlds' they 'discovered'. In North and South America, Sub-Saharan Africa, large areas of South-east Asia, among the Pacific Islanders and even in Arctic and Antarctic regions (see Chapter 2), virtually all the peoples who had no previous contact with European 'civilization' lived untroubled by nudity. Some wore clothes for practical reasons, but social and public nudity was not prohibited.

Seen through the lens of European (Christian) mythology, the natives' nudity was clear evidence of their ontological inferiority. They were 'like animals' – which justified their enslavement and murder by the millions. The Europeans treated them as they had been treating horses, donkeys, and pests for millennia[124]. They shipped them to wherever there was demand, trading them in markets. Significantly, slaves were kept naked, 'like animals', as they were shipped and sold (as Swiss traveller Franz Louis Michel wrote in 1702, the enslaved Africans 'are entirely naked when they arrive'; Michel, 1916). When Christian slave-owners bought slaves and put clothes on them, it was not to humanize them but only to protect the delicate sensibilities of white Christian women and children.

The animality of the naked 'primitives' was explicit in the human zoos (or 'ethnological expositions') thriving across Europe and the United States around the turn of the 20th century. The animality of the specimens Europeans found in their overseas colonies was highlighted by the fact that they were both naked (or semi-naked, as usual to protect the sensibilities of white women and children) and (often) held in cages like other animals (Dreesbach, 2012, and Oliveira, 2015).

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[124] And with slaves too, in antiquity.

Fig. 7 A group of natives of the Philippines on display at the 1904 World Fair in St. Louis

When they did not use the naked 'animals' they had 'discovered' to work their land or exhibited them in zoos, Christian colonizers set out to 'humanize' them. To humanize them meant to clothe them, and to convert them to Christianity. From the European perspective, humanizing, clothing, and Christianizing were closely related concepts.

8. Humanize, Christianize, clothe the animals

Christian missions were established worldwide, with the explicit goal of transforming those animals (indigenous people) into humans (Christians, Europeans):

'The priests and the church overtly presented their mission as transforming the colonized animals into human beings through conversion' (Mignolo, 2012: 73).

The first step in this mission to 'humanize' the natives was to clothe them. Anthropologist George Henry Lane-Fox Pitt-Rivers, describing European missions in Oceania in the 1920s, explains the missionaries' mindset and intervention:

'The missionary arriving amongst naked or half-naked savages, with his own mind saturated with the idea of "sinfulness of the flesh" and the vileness of the human body, finds that in his "flock to be converted" there is an almost complete absence of body self-consciousness and a (to him) indescribably shocking openness and joyful acceptance in sexual matters. His first efforts are directed towards inculcating "decency" and "modesty" by creating a sense of "shame". In other words by inculcating "flesh-consciousness" and the virtue of concealment, the two sign-posts of Christian culture… They teach their adherents that no one can be a Christian who does not wear shirts and trousers'[125] (1927: 59).

This process of Christianization, which involved instilling in the newly-conquered peoples a sense of 'flesh-consciousness and the virtue of concealment, the two sign-posts of Christian culture', took place wherever Christian colonizers arrived. This likely began with missions in Western and Southern Africa during the 15th century, followed by the Americas, India, and Oceania. All European powers engaged in this practice, wherever they went. Gordon Sayre tells similar stories about the French colonizers' attitudes in relation to the 'naked savages' of what would become French Canada (1997: 144 ff.). The British also forcefully clothed naked peoples throughout their empire, as Roxann Wheeler tells us:

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[125] Pitt-Rivers adds: 'In analyzing the *raison d'être* of missionary insistence upon clothing and of their horror of nudity, it is not only the real or supposed influence of clothing upon the native mind that is relevant, but also the influence that contact with nudity has upon the missionary's own mind. That this motive should influence his attitude, the missionary is probably seldom conscious, for few missionaries practise psychological self-examination. A French Catholic missionary in New Guinea, however, once admitted to me that of all the difficulties that try the strength and temper of Europeans in their prime who set out to lead a celibate and devotional life in that torrid and sex-inflaming climate, the daily sight of, and contact with, bare-breasted young women was one of the most trying and most conducive to nervous strain' (ibid.)

> 'the British Christianizing process... involved clothing. The degree to which native assimilation to religious instruction was gauged to be successful was perceptible in the dress that native converts adopted – or failed to adopt' (2000: 19).

In India, for example, nudity had been perfectly normal prior to the Islamic invasions, beginning in the 12th century. Although things had started to change under the rule of the (Islamic) Mughals', it was Christian missionaries and the British colonial administration that imposed universal clothedness, in the nineteenth century. In the early 19th century, nudity was still normal among lower-caste Indians (Cohn, 1996: 129). Christian missionaries and the British were particularly keen to impose 'modesty' on women, introducing 'criteria for modest clothing that befitted Christian women' (ibid: 141). As Britain established direct rule over India in 1858, the struggle to impose modesty on Indians intensified, despite vehement local protests. For example, in response to the king of Travancore's resistance against the imposition of Christian modesty,

> 'the government of Madras, under pressure from missionaries in England and in India, instructed Cullen[126] in no uncertain terms that they were a Christian government and "the whole civilized world would cry shame on us, if we did not take a firm stand" against the Travancore kings' (ibid: 142).

Public nudity in India was made a crime by the British in 1860.

Through the imposition of clothes, the European colonizers claimed to 'humanize' their new subjects. However, the nakedness in which the natives had been found remained evidence of their being 'savages' and 'primitives', which gave the Europeans the 'divine' right to rule over them, even after their animal bodies had been covered and made 'modest'[127].

The Western mission of 'civilizing' naked 'savages' who do not abide by the two sign-posts of Christian culture – flesh-consciousness and the virtue of concealment – is still ongoing; it

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[126] Major General William Cullen was the British Resident in the Kingdom of Travancore and Cochin from 1850 to 1860.
[127] Often under the pretext of 'civilizing' them.

has not been completed yet. In the Peruvian Amazon, it is thought that there remain around 15 uncontacted tribes[128], which are constantly targeted by US evangelicals trying to clothe them. Stephen Corry of Survival International, an NGO trying to protect uncontacted tribes from Christian evangelists, said in a recent interview:

> 'Missionaries insisting on clothing "naked savages" is the most enduring metaphor for the colonial destruction of tribal peoples'[129]

Ethnos360, previously known as New Tribes Mission (NTM), is a US-based evangelical organization whose mission is to 'evangelize unreached people groups, translate the Scriptures and see indigenous churches established that glorify God'[130]. Since 1942, they have been contacting previously uncontacted naked tribes in the Amazon with the goal of Christianizing them. From their Christian perspective, the nakedness of the indigenous peoples means they are not only 'animals' but also, often, 'evil'. For example, Survival International reports that an NTM missionary described the Yanomami as

> 'complete savages who don't use clothes and are totally enmeshed in witchcraft and adoration of the Devil.'[131]

Along similar lines, in 2011 an Australian TV documentary[132] portrayed the recently contacted Suruwaha tribe as evil Satan worshippers[133]. The association between this claim and the TV footage of completely naked tribespeople, with the camera lingering on their naked lower bodies, is really quite striking, and hard to dismiss as purely coincidental.

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[128] https://www.brazzil.com/23868-missionaries-trying-to-clothe-naked-amazon-indians-are-bringing-them-disease/
[129] https://www.brazzil.com/23868-missionaries-trying-to-clothe-naked-amazon-indians-are-bringing-them-disease/
[130] https://ethnos360.org/
[131] Ibid.
[132] Funded by evangelical Christians.
[133] https://vimeo.com/297702801?embedded=true&source=video_title&owner=68964108

Fig. 8 Yanomami women and children gathering leaves. *2010 ©Fiona Watson/Survival*

Although the most extreme cases of dehumanization of naked savages involve Christian evangelists, these are perhaps just the most glaring examples of a widespread attitude, which often relies on supposedly-secular humanist values to dehumanize naked 'primitives' and justify Westerners seeking to export their 'superior civilization' and 'humanity'. We are all familiar with images of naked African children that Western charities use to solicit donations from aspiring 'white saviours'. Such advertising campaigns play on the 'humanity' of the donor and on the *potential* for becoming-human of the naked African children[134].

9. Nakedness and social hierarchy within human societies: a sliding scale of humanity

In the previous section I discussed how in the Christian West nakedness has been associated with animality (inhumanity) – naked peoples are 'primitives', 'uncivilized', 'savages', etc. At

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[134] For example: https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/africa/twoyearold-nigerian-boy-accused-of-being-a-witch-rescued-by-aid-workers-a6875706.html. The focus on children is perhaps due to the perception that adult Africans are 'lost causes'.

best, they have the *potential* to become human. Thus, Western humanists – regardless of whether they identify as Christians or secular – have a history of philanthropic engagement with inhuman/not-yet-human Others. They have sought to 'save' them and humanize them, including by clothing them in 'human' clothes[135].

Usually, indigenous peoples have actively participated in their own 'humanization'. Given the humanist socio-political hierarchical order established by the Europeans – based on the domination of humans over animals by divine right – it was always in the subjects' interest to 'humanize' themselves. In his classic 1958 novel *Things Fall Apart*, Nigerian writer Chinua Achebe offers a beautiful account of the imposition and spread of Christianity and Christian customs by the British in Nigeria. He tells stories of how Christianity customs spread through a combination of coercion and 'voluntary' choice of indigenous people who Christianized/Europeanized themselves. Achebe tells us that it quickly became clear to the natives that they could achieve relative power and wealth within their communities by converting to Christianity and behaving like the new masters. The British missionaries saw the converted and European-looking natives as 'more human' than the other natives, and thus put them in charge.

Similar processes occurred across the colonized world, with native people starting to dress in clothes resembling their European masters. Although clothing did not *fully* make them 'human', natives' adoption of 'flesh-consciousness' and the 'virtue of concealment' made them 'human enough' for their rulers to interact with them without the discomfort or horror associated with nudity[136]. Historian Rani Kerin explains how the British ensured that Aboriginal people in Australia were 'sufficiently clothed to prevent indecent exposure and to protect the sensibilities of white women and children' (2006: 83). Wearing European clothes also symbolized a higher level of a humanity, which allowed some natives to obtain positions of power over those who less clothed. However, it is clear that natives could never be dressed *enough* to be mistaken for their masters.

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[135] From Jacques Cartier's 1536 kidnapping of a group of Iroquois, whom he forcibly brough to France to be 'civilized' (Sayre, 1997: 146), to modern Western 'humanitarian' interventions, not much has changed.
[136] See footnote 20 above.

Natives increasingly made efforts to resemble their European rulers and bridge the anthropological divide to present themselves as equally-human. They could not quite succeed:

> 'When the type of clothing worn [by the natives] consisted of rags cast off by white people (as was often the case), the result, according to Charles Duguid and other anthropologically-inclined observers, was the creation of "very inferior and degraded editions of white people".' (ibid.)

The natives' (more or less successful) attempts to cover their bodies with clothes similar to those worn by their Christian masters led to a 'sliding scale' of varying degrees of 'humanity', where individuals were ranked based on their resemblance (or lack thereof) to the Europeans (and thus to God).

Even after the disappearance of the unclothed savage from the modern, Christianized world, traces of this past remain: a memory of previous 'animality' that evokes feelings of slavery, genocide, violence, and oppression. In the experience of the colonized, the biblical association between animality and nudity has become a lived reality. The colonial portrayal of natives as godless animals has made the biblical myth tangible. Abstract discussions of 'divine glory' or the notion of a special relationship between humans and God have taken on material form. The post-colonial world is populated by individuals who are no longer 'animals' but who have not fully become human either. They occupy various positions on a spectrum – a sliding scale – of humanity.

Human zoos no longer exist, but the belief that that some people are 'more human than others' persists. Migrations have brought many former colonial subjects to Europe and North America, where, despite their efforts to assert their humanity, they face an impossible comparison to an unrealistic ideal of humanity that is even less attainable for them than it is for the ruling classes. Their former colonial masters still do not fully see them as human – in 2015, British Prime Minister David Cameron referred to migrants coming to the UK as a

'swarm'[137]. Even for those who appear to have integrated into European or Western societies, the threat of dehumanization never really goes away. Migrants remain suspended in a state of being less than fully human – with their inclusion feeling incomplete and temporary, contingent on circumstances beyond their control.

10. The sliding scale of humanity within the Western social order

The discussion above of the connection between exposed flesh and the hierarchical ordering of individuals can be applied more generally. Naked bodies are associated with animals, who can be killed or enslaved. Fully clothed bodies represent the ideal human, who sits at the top of the socio-political hierarchy. They must remain clothed to maintain their quasi-divine, disembodied appearance which in the Christian tradition justifies their power (Gen 1:26 ff.). Between these extremes – between the pre-colonial native and the (European) aristocracy – most individuals occupy intermediate positions, influenced by various factors such as race, class, and sex. The poles of animality and full humanity serve to construct a 'sliding scale of humanity' – populated by individuals who are not 'animals' but who cannot quite achieve the complete humanity they aspire to. They remain in a suspended state somewhere in the middle.

Each intermediate position along this sliding scale of humanity, which hierarchically organizes humanist societies, is associated with appropriate levels of disembodiment corresponding to the relative social power one holds or seeks. Consequently, women are perceived as 'less-disembodied' and 'closer to the Earth' than men, the working classes are seen as somewhat animalistic (less human) than the upper classes, and migrants are viewed as 'a swarm'. At the bottom of the socio-political scale, individuals who are considered mad, criminals and perverts are so closely associated with animality – due to their sick or deviant souls that cannot control their bodies and desires – that they have long been excluded from society and *literally* confined in cages, just like 'animals' (their case will be discussed in the next chapter). As flesh is a marker of animality and embodiment, each intermediate position

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[137] https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/av/uk-politics-33714282

on the scale of humanity there also corresponds to a certain amount of flesh that one is socially expected to expose.

The general principle applies that a relatively 'lower' social status means exhibiting less of the 'divine' characteristics of humankind and more of the 'animal' ones in public. To publicly expose more flesh immediately suggests that one is 'more embodied', less capable of controlling their desires/instincts and especially their sexuality. It signals belonging to a lower social group. For example, when I see a man walking around topless in an urban setting, I immediately assume he is working-class[138]. Conversely, business or political leaders – or anybody in a position of authority – would not be able to project the same authority if they were to expose 'undignified' parts of their bodies.

Similar principles apply to sex/gender power dynamics. In Western societies, it is more socially acceptable for women to expose many[139] parts of their bodies than it is for men, as apparent from a comparison of male and female dress codes and 'modesty' standards[140]. Although it is rare to hear Westerners discuss their own modesty standards – men are particularly unlikely to acknowledge they comply with any modesty standards – arguably, modesty standards and dress codes exist to ensure men and women hide their body parts as appropriate to their social standing. Women are allowed/expected to expose more flesh than men because they are more embodied, 'closer to the Earth' than men.

Although the matter is complicated by the existence of intersecting power dynamics, the general principle is that women expose more flesh than men, just as working-class individuals expose more flesh than upper-class ones (Skeggs, 1997). When women ascend to[141] positions of authority in society – when they 'become respectable', in Skeggs' words –

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[138] No middle-class, 'respectable' man would be seen topless anywhere other than at the beach. Aristocratic men are rarely seen topless, even at the beach.

[139] The social norm against exposing female breasts is perhaps an exception. Female breasts are less socially acceptable than male ones due to the 'sexual' nature attributed to them in Christianity. However, male chests are *also* prohibited in everyday respectable spaces.

[140] In formal and business contexts, women can expose legs and shoulders, while men rarely expose more than their head and hands. In casual settings, men may expose forearms and lower legs, but women can expose shoulders, backs, bellies, upper thighs, etc. In some countries, men are *legally* allowed to wear less clothing than women, however, rarely do men exercise this right – across Western societies, the norm is that men wear *significantly more* clothing than women.

[141] Or seek.

they hide their bodies like men do. The same applies to working-class individuals who manage to climb the social ladder: they dress 'appropriately' for their new social status. Individuals expose their flesh to the extent compatible with their social status.

By adhering to the modesty standards appropriate to their social status, individuals bring about the religious order of society. They order themselves according to their alleged closeness/resemblance to the Christian God and their social status. In this sense, Agamben is probably right to interpret Augustine's claim that 'God is order' as praxis (God gives order to the world, 2011: 89-90) and to argue, with Thomas Aquinas, that the social ordering of individuals is the only content of the notion of God and that it is by taking up our orderly places in society that we show our love for God ('The only content of transcendent order is the immanent order, but the meaning of the immanent order is nothing other than the relation to the transcendent end', 2011: 87). In other words, with Durkheim, we show our belonging to our society by obeying its ordering criteria.

Individual breaches of the sanctioned religious/societal order produce shame-reactions. Although occasionally there may also be social repercussions, it is the immediate shame – the *fear* of social repercussions – that ensures the reproduction of the order. As I have experienced by wearing clothes that were 'too revealing', hence inappropriate to my gender/age/class, exposing 'too much' flesh causes shame to arise. Such shame reactions are important because they highlight that, to fit in my society, I must not expose any more flesh than appropriate for individuals with my body and of my age and status[142].

Thus, Western humanism[143] entails that not only are my nudity and naked corporeality[144] prohibited as carriers of animality on whose exclusion humanist Western societies are founded (since *Genesis*), but also, in everyday life, the prohibition of nudity assumes intermediate forms that reflect one's social position. Even within a same society, the prohibition of nudity applies differently to individuals depending on their gender, age, race, class, cultural background, etc. These different ways in which the Western prohibition of

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[142] I discuss male modesty standards and my attempt to challenge them in Chapter 6.
[143] Christian or otherwise.
[144] Including any signs of my sexuality.

nudity applies to different social groups and their intersections are *cases* of the general humanist principle that (disembodied) humans are superior to (fleshy) animals, and therefore rule over them by divine right (Gen 1:26 ff.). Most concrete individuals are suspended somewhere between the opposite poles of ideal disembodied humanity and animality – and must manage their precarious position[145].

11. The separation between God and the animal within ourselves: the clandestinity of our private life

I have discussed above how the Christian separation between God and animals produces a political order that excludes the animalized Others. Within European and Western 'human' societies, this order underpins a hierarchy between people based on their varying degrees of 'humanity'[146]. However, the distinction between the human and the animal cuts across all of us, starting from *within* ourselves. As I will discuss below, a crucial to the functioning of the political and theological apparatus, which excludes or devalues others for their 'animality', is the denial, concealment, and shaming of *our own* 'animality'.

L.A. photographer Laura Aguilar is known for works in which she used her own nude body as a sculpture in the desert landscapes of Southern California. She positioned her body back where it belongs, in 'nature', among the non-human entities such as boulders and rocks. Her work is a reaction – a silent protest – against the humanist premise that humans are separate from 'nature', 'animals' and the rest of the 'natural' environment. As a lesbian activist, Aguilar was keenly aware of the concept of humanity acts as an exclusionary or ordering mechanism. Once we accept the hierarchical distinction between God (ideal humanity) and animality, we inevitably introduce a social and political order based on how closely people align with, or distance themselves from, the divine ideal. The sliding scale of humanity described above follows as a natural consequence of the humanist and Christian notion of humanity. This is why Aguilar's response to the de-humanization she experiences due to her

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[145] Power dynamics between genders and social groups influence how the prohibition of nudity is applied. However, attributing the prohibition *solely* to patriarchy overlooks a broader perspective.
[146] Or their perceived proximity to 'animality'.

sexual preferences is a rejection of the original and foundational separation and difference between the human and the rest of nature. It is not a claim to be admitted to the exclusive club of the 'fully human'. Instead, Aguilar returns her nude body among the non-human, 'inglorious' 'nature'. Her symbolic act is an act of defiance, or perhaps a vision of an alternative universe that could have been, one in which we let go of our delusion of 'humanity' and radical difference.

Fig. 9 Laura Aguilar, Grounded #111

Fig. 10 Laura Aguilar,

Grounded Untitled

Fig. 11 Laura Aguilar, Nature Self Portrait #2

In *The Open*, Agamben observes that by constructing a notion of 'humanity' that incorporates both an 'organic' or 'vegetative' part and a 'relational' or 'intellectual' part – a 'body' and a 'mind' (or a 'soul'), – we effectively divide our life and being into two. By claiming that we are 'two things in one', we create a *division within ourselves*:

> 'The division of life into vegetal and relational, organic and animal, animal and human, therefore passes first of all as a mobile border within living man' (Agamben, 2004: 15).

Agamben proposes that we consider 'humanity' as the result of a *disjunction* between a 'body' and a 'soul' (rather than their conjunction as an animal and divine element). This shifts the focus from the metaphysical mystery of body and soul coming together to 'the practical and political [problem] of their separation' (ibid.).

In his short film *Critique of Separation* (1961), Guy Debord mentions the 'clandestinity of our private life' ('*la clandestinité de la vie privée*') as one form of separation. Debord says that our private life is incommunicable, and undocumented (ibid.). Although Debord does not elaborate on the concept any further, Agamben further explores it in his recent work *The Use of Bodies*. He notes that

> 'private life accompanies us as a secret, as a stowaway… it is separated from us as a clandestine and is, at the same time, inseparable from us to the extent that, as a stowaway, it furtively shares experience with us. This split and this inseparability constantly define the status of life in our culture' (Agamben, 2015: xx).

This 'private life' that accompanies us as a stowaway includes, in particular, 'corporeal life itself and all that is traditionally inscribed in the sphere of so-called intimacy: nutrition, digestion, urination, defecation, sleep, sexuality' (ibid.). In our culture, Agamben remarks, we must keep our intimate, corporeal life hidden away at all costs:

> 'And the weight of this faceless companion is so strong that each seeks to share it with someone else – and nevertheless, alienation and secrecy never completely

disappear and remain irresolvable even in the most loving life together. Here life is truly like the stolen fox that the boy hid under his clothes and that he cannot confess to even though it is savagely tearing at his flesh[147]' (Agamben, 2015: xxi).

Much like in the ancient Greek story of the Spartan boy who kept hiding the stolen fox under his clothes even though it was eating his flesh, similarly Agamben suggests that in our everyday life we hide under our clothes our 'private life' – our so-called intimacy, our corporeal existence. Our clothes serve as the mark and instrument of this separation, visually, symbolically, and practically. Underneath our clothes, we cannot see, touch, or feel our bodies. Our bodies are not only visually and symbolically hidden from the world, but their presence is also erased from public space, preventing engagement. As Agamben says, we carry them along *as stowaways*, while going about our daily lives.

This separation between our 'private' (corporeal) life and our 'respectable', public one mirrors the separation between humanity and animality which I have been discussing in this chapter. The separation and exclusion of those deemed to be (entirely, or to a degree) 'animals' from the so-called 'respectable' human community necessarily requires us to also separate, exclude, and conceal that same 'animality' that is within us. Thus, the production and exclusion of the Others begins *within* ourselves – hence Agamben rightly says:

> 'In our culture, the decisive political conflict, which governs every other conflict, is that between the animality and the humanity of man.' (2004: 80)

And therefore,

> 'It is more urgent to work on these divisions, to ask in what way – within man – has man been separated from non-man, and the animal from the human, than it is to take positions on the great issues, on so-called human rights and values.' (2004: 16)

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[147] 'A boy from Sparta stole a fox and hid it under his cloak, and because his people, in their foolishness, were more ashamed of a botched robbery than we fear punishment, he let it gnaw through his belly rather than be discovered' (Montaigne, *Essais*, I, XIV, in Agamben, 2015: vii)

Agamben had already explored the reasons for the separation of the animal from the human within man in his seminal work *Homo Sacer*. In *Homo Sacer*, he analyses the conceptual structure of this separation, which he calls the *ban* and which he takes to be at the core of modern political technologies of domination (of *biopolitics*). Political life, he notes, is built on the foundational exclusion of our 'animality'. In order to participate in the respectable, social and political dimension of life, we must separate out our 'animality' (or, in Agamben's words, our 'bare life'[148]); yet, of course, we can never really get rid of this unwanted animality. We can never become the idealized humans we say we are; our bare life remains with us like a stowaway. The result is what Agamben calls an 'exclusive inclusion' – and, equally, an 'inclusive exclusion':

> 'Man… separates and opposes himself to his own bare life and, at the same time, maintains himself in relation to that bare life in an inclusive exclusion' (1998: 8)

Our inhuman (animal) corporeality is excluded from respectable social and political life, and yet, by the very fact of being always with us, it is also unavoidably caught up in it. It does not have a say in what happens to it, but it cannot leave. It is the status of the 'bandit'.

> 'The life of the bandit… is not a piece of animal nature without any relation to law and the city. It is, rather, a threshold of indistinction and of passage between animal and man, *physis* and *nomos*, exclusion and inclusion: the life of the bandit is the life of the *loup garou*, the werewolf, who is precisely *neither man nor beast*, and who dwells paradoxically within both while belonging to neither' (1998: 105).

I suggested above that socio-political hierarchies in our everyday world as well as the complete and genocidal othering of entire peoples are justified by the differential production of varying degrees of animality ('bare life') in individuals and social groups. For this reason, Agamben sees the production of bare life in the other as the crucial operation of power at the core of modern Western politics, for at stake is the decision about who is the subject and who is the object:

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[148] Our 'bare life' is what remains after removing the 'fully human' (relational, 'divine') part.

'Contrary to our modern habit of representing the political realm in terms of citizens' rights, free will, and social contracts, from the point of view of sovereignty only bare life is authentically political.' (1998: 106)

In this sense, Agamben argues that modern Western politics is, before all else, about qualifying people as more or less human – and more or less animal. Therefore, Agamben refuses to think of politics in terms of the State and traditional political forums: because these are founded on the *preliminary* exclusion of people's bare life, which is the truly political act (1998: 109). He seeks to deactivate this foundational mechanism of modern Western politics – to halt the production of 'animality' within us, to allow us to 'become whole'. We cannot continue on the humanist path of superficially claiming that 'we are all equally human': because, as long as we still believe that there is *any* 'animality' within us, some people will inevitably be constructed as 'more animal' than others.

It is also important to appreciate that the uncontroversial fact that we conceal parts of ourselves (our animality, our naked corporeality) in our everyday social and 'respectable' life implies the belief that those parts are shameful, 'animal'. As Althusser insists, ideological beliefs have a material existence. To believe in an idea is to act as if the idea were true, regardless of whether we consciously accept it as true or not (1994: 127, see 2.7 above). If we did not believe in the 'animality' of our naked corporeality, why do we conceal it? What are we ashamed of?

Conclusion

In this chapter I have traced the modern European and Western prohibition of public nudity to the Christian separation between humanity and animality – to the ideal of disembodiment, or of volitional control over the desires of the flesh, which survives essentially unchanged in modern Western humanism. I have developed the suggestion, particularly dear to

Agamben[149], that the separation between humanity and animality which founds Christianity is a *political* act. The theological-political apparatus that produces and separates an alleged 'animality' within us is a technology of domination.

The exclusion of our nudity – and our *flesh*, more generally – from the public and 'respectable' socio-political dimension is foundational to the Western societal order. It is precisely through the denial of our animality that 'human' society is established. Social and political hierarchies are justified by claims of greater degrees of 'humanity' that require the exclusion of animality – of our flesh – from the public space. To assert our belonging to 'humanity', to preserve our human identity and relative power, and to feel safe, we must conceal our unwelcome, un-God-like, animality.

In the next chapter, I explore these ideas in the context of my experience in prison. I suggest that in the unsafe environment of the prison, inmates become even *more* attached to anything that symbolizes human status. This leads to a rejection of the flesh as a dangerous sign of animality and a redirection of the label of animality towards others.

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[149] And to the gorilla Ishmael.

PART 3: ADVENTURES IN REAL LIFE

Chapter 4: In prison: nudity and the (human?) beast

'Only animals are naked'.
(a fellow inmate at Wandsworth Prison)

Introduction

In the previous chapter, I discussed the exclusion of nudity from the Western concept of humanity. I pointed out that in Christianity[150], humans are distinguished from animals through their clothedness, as per the creation story in *Genesis*. Clothing, which replaces the lost prelapsarian grace, allows humans to present themselves as disembodied and in control of their sexual instincts and desires. Thus, clothing is integral to the Western definition of humanity and the power associated with belonging to humanity.

I also discussed the historical association of inhumanity with indigenous peoples, and I noted how central their nudity has often been in 'proving' their animality. Perhaps, in today's West, the category of animality is no longer applied to people; indigenous populations have been successfully assimilated and clothed, human zoos have been abolished – human animality survives as an invisible threat in the hierarchical organization of individuals within human societies.

Yet perhaps I was wrong to think of human animality as a thing of the past, and to say that human zoos no longer exist. While reflecting on these ideas, fate intervened and sent me on a

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[150] This applies to all Abrahamic traditions, arguably. The creation myth of Judaeo-Christianity (*Genesis 1-3*) is essentially replicated in the *Q'ran* (see 6.6 below).

fieldwork adventure in prison. On 31 March 2019, I was convicted of a crime and sentenced to 4 years of imprisonment. After the judge read my sentence, I was handcuffed and placed in a cell in the basement of Southwark Crown Court in London. Hours later, I was put in a police van and transported to Wandsworth prison, a medium-high security prison (category B), where I spent the following year or so. After Wandsworth, I also served time in two other English prisons: HMP Onley (a medium-security prison, category C) and HMP Ford (a low-security prison, category D). In total, I spent two years in prison before being released on probation.

In Chapter 2, I suggested that in modern Western societies, notions of madness, criminality, and perversion primarily function as *threats*, to ensure conformity and obedience. Like the threat of animality discussed in Chapter 3, madness, criminality, and perversion are ideological constructs: despite the material impact such labels have on people's lives, they ultimately remain delusional fantasies. No-one is truly 'mad', 'criminal', or a 'pervert'.

Madness, criminality, and perversion are all predicated on the same inability to control one's instincts and desires which characterizes animality – hence madness, criminality, and perversion are different from humanity in the same way animality is. In Christianity, the difference between humans and animals is that humans have a 'soul' (a free will) that enables them to control their instincts and desires. Animals do not have it. Mad people, criminals, and perverts have a 'sick' or 'faulty' soul, which does not function correctly. Therefore, it is *as if* mad people, criminals, and perverts did not have a soul: despite their human appearances, they are *like* animals. They lack a functioning free will. Christian/humanist constructions of animality and of madness/criminality/perversion are profoundly related.

Many might fail to see the essential similarity between animality and criminality. And yet, suddenly, on 31 March 2019 I found myself locked up in a cage, treated like a dangerous beast by guards whose job was to protect the public from me, and surrounded by hundreds of other 'animals' like me: criminals, madmen, perverts, and many variations in-between. I had become an animal, locked up in an actual, modern-day human zoo.

Fig. 12 A van carrying prisoners at Wandsworth prison, London

The similarities between prisons and zoos are significant. When, shortly after my release from prison, my wife and I took our daughter to a zoo, I found the experience deeply upsetting. I empathized with all those who were imprisoned in those cages. I was sickened by the zoo's self-portrayal as a 'sanctuary' – surely, anyone would much rather be free than caged in a 'sanctuary'. Unlike zoos, prisons do not allow spectators: perhaps this is because prisoners speak and could say things to visitors they are not supposed to hear. I wonder what the forms of life caged in zoos would tell human visitors if they communicate with them. I believe they are very unhappy at being treated like 'animals'. Anyway, without a doubt, prisoners do not see themselves as 'animals' and are angered by their forced animalization.

In this chapter, I attempt to unravel the complex relationship between societal and ideological constructions of criminality, madness, and perversion as forms of inhumanity, as well as attitudes towards nudity in the context of prison. Before my imprisonment, I assumed the norms of 'respectable' society to be more relaxed among convicted prisoners. I did not anticipate that prisoners who had been criminalized, excluded, and dehumanized would

prioritize their sense of respectability. I imagined that such a radical exclusion from human society would bring a certain degree of freedom – freedom from the need to appear human. I was *very* wrong.

When I landed in prison, I knew nothing about prison life. I looked at other inmates to learn how things worked in that new and strange place. I largely did what I saw others doing. Most things made sense; however, there was one behaviour that I found utterly perplexing: the inmates did not shower naked – they kept their underwear on while showering. Prior to my time in prison, I had always observed people showering naked in all-male gym or swimming pool changing rooms, in both England and Italy[151]. Showering with clothes on appeared absurd to me, especially in prison where there was a lack of drying facilities and spare clothes. Wet underwear would have to be hung up to dry in cramped and poorly ventilated shared cells, which would take a long time and smell. Why not simply shower naked?

I chose not to partake in this nonsensical practice. When I asked other prisoners why they kept their underwear on in the showers, they didn't seem to have a valid explanation. Every prisoner I spoke to claimed they were only doing it because they saw others doing it. There were no written rules against shower nudity. It seemed a textbook case of herd behaviour – and I refused to conform. I decided to shower naked.

In the very beginning, everything seemed fine. In my prison wing, the showers had separate cubicles; there were no doors or curtains, but the partitions between cubicles still ensured a degree of privacy. In the prison gym, however, the showers were communal. This did not concern me much, as many of the gym showers I had used in my previous, 'free' life were also communal and I had always showered naked. The first few times using these communal gym showers, nothing out of the ordinary happened. But then, it happened. It must have been my third or fourth time I used the gym showers when the inmate showering next to me – in his underwear, of course – turned to me and angrily asked: 'why are you naked?'. I barely

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[151] In the U.S., I was surprised to see people hiding their bodies from each other even inside sex-segregated changing rooms (I attributed it to Americans' puritanism and discomfort around their bodies). Barry Miller notes this is a recent development (*On the Loss of Nudity in the Men's Locker Room*, 2016). In Britain and throughout Europe nudity in sex-segregated changing rooms is normal.

had time to reply, muttering something like 'because I am showering...?' when he punched me straight in my face.

Following that episode, I spent much time pondering over what had happened, trying to make sense of it. In prison, among the 'animals', people seemed to have a more complicated relationship with their nudity compared to those outside. Why?

This chapter is organized as follows. First, I discuss inmates' views on shower nudity (section 1). Then, I provide a general portrayal of prison life and its lack of safety (section 2). In sections 3 and 4, I delve into my own experience, confirming Foucault's view that the purpose of prison is to 'humanize' its prisoners, who are presumed to be inhuman. The lack of privacy inmates have reflects this assumption of inhumanity (section 5). Prisoners resist the prison regime by asserting their humanity in various ways (section 6). Hiding their flesh and projecting animality onto others – such as 'perverts' or 'rapists' – is a common form of resistance (section 7). I conclude by noting that, in the unsafe space of the prison, even I struggled to fully embrace my corporeality (section 8).

1. Prisoners and nudity: a survey

Before the episode I recounted above, I didn't think one could be attacked for showering naked in single-sex showers in England. I was wrong, obviously. When it did happen, I immediately assumed I was in the right, and that the person who punched me would be reprimanded. I was wrong, again. The prison guard on duty gave me a speech about the importance of being street-smart and adhering to the unspoken rules of prison. He told me that relying on the written rules of the institution (which obviously do not require prisoners to shower clothed) and my ethical principles would land me in serious trouble. He said it was not the job of prison guards to protect foolish prisoners from their own stupidity. He locked me inside a storage room ('to protect me') and then escorted me back to my cell, where he locked me inside for the rest of the day, in case other prisoners sought to harm me as well.

Luckily, he had no reasons to worry about other prisoners attacking me for breaking the unwritten rule against showering naked. In fact, after that incident, I received a lot of support from other inmates. I was in pain, with a black eye for a few weeks, but this allowed me many opportunities to discuss the unwritten prohibition of shower nudity with other inmates, and to hear their perspectives. My black eye helped me to investigate the psycho-social aspects of nudity in prison.

It turned out that inmates' perspectives varied greatly, but there were clear patterns based on ethnicity, religion, and age. Older white Europeans generally sided with me, while younger white men were less willing to challenge the prison norm – as someone said to me: 'you may be right, but why do you have to be different? Why can't you just shower with your pants on like everyone else?'

The Black Muslim community, which accounted for a significant percentage of prisoners and included the inmate who had assaulted me, had a different viewpoint. Forced to apologize to me by an older and respected prisoner, the perpetrator justified his actions as self-defence against what he perceived as 'attempted rape'. He believed that 'only gay people shower naked', and therefore assumed I intended to rape him. The prisoners in the cell next to mine agreed and thought his violent reaction was justified due to the perceived sexual threat[152].

Others, who had heard about the incident but had not directly spoken to the man who had punched me, offered different explanations. A former cellmate of mine from Guinea believed that people should not shower naked because the male body is 'ugly' and unsightly. According to him, we must wear underwear in the shower out of respect for others, to prevent them from seeing our unattractive genitals. A thoughtful and educated Somali inmate who I was taking an educational course with pointed out that nudity is considered offensive in Islam, and he would never shower naked as a sign of respect to God. Someone I was casually chatting with in the dinner queue made a succinct point: '*only animals are naked*'.

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[152] Homophobia in prison is a legitimate and respectable justification.

When I asked a prison lawyer about it, she told me she knew it had become common practice for British male prisoners to shower clothed. She attributed this phenomenon to the high numbers of African Muslim inmates – most of them, very young. In some prisons, including Wandsworth, there are so many of them that they can enforce their own cultural rules – and prohibit nudity, even in the showers. In Islam, as I discuss below[153], the prohibition of nudity is similar to the Christian one, but it is generally interpreted and applied even more strictly.

That lawyer was probably right to explain the unspoken prohibition of shower nudity in English prisons as a product of shifting demographics and the influence of cultural (Islamic) customs. However, I also suspect there is something unique about the prison environment that makes nudity feel *particularly* intimidating and dangerous to prisoners, compared to 'free' citizens. I wonder if the general principle of Christian/Abrahamic humanism, which associates nakedness with animality, contributes to nudity feeling *especially* unwelcome among inmates who are desperately trying to assert their humanity against a dehumanizing institution. Below, I develop this idea further, drawing on my own experience as an inmate.

2. Prison

Prison is a violent and unsafe place – emotionally rather than physically. It is difficult to convey the reality of prison to those who have not lived it. Cultural theorist Dylan Rodríguez, who studies incarcerated individuals, explains:

> 'as countless captives and prison survivors testify, their formal and totalizing
> subjection to a regime of legitimized brutality is a condition that largely exceeds
> communicative possibility, that is, it is a condition beyond words' (Rodríguez, 2006:
> 72)

Prisons are not violent and unsafe because they are filled with violent and dangerous murderers or 'criminals', as one might assume from media or political narratives. Instead,

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[153] See Chapter 6.

prisons are populated by drug addicts, individuals with serious mental health issues, poor and often illiterate immigrants, black youths, and many other marginalized and often desperate individuals who have fallen through the cracks of society[154]. During my two years in prison, I encountered countless people who needed help, not 'criminals'. I met many people who had been variously scapegoated by society for being poor, or different, or illiterate, and because prisons need to be filled (in the end, I suspect it does not even matter *who* gets incarcerated, so long as the criminal justice system finds enough individuals to convict to populate its prisons[155]).

Upon my arrival at Wandsworth prison, when the guard took me to my cell and slammed the heavy steel door behind me and left, I realized I had entered an underworld I was not prepared for. My cell was 2m wide by 3m long (Fig. 13). It was very cold due to the broken window, which had been poorly covered with old newspaper and glued with toothpaste. There was a bunk bed, right next to it an unscreened toilet, and a small sink. A dilapidated shelf, doubling as table, held a television. My new cellmate was watching television on the lower bunk. I learned that he had been imprisoned for storing stolen car parts in his warehouse. He had been there for two weeks. He seemed very nice. A few hours later, the guards arrived to open our cell door for our designated 40 minutes of 'association time'[156]. I walked out onto the landing and used the phone to call my wife, telling her I was ok. Then I climbed into bed, still fully clothed because the thin prison-issued blanket was insufficient to keep me warm – and I tried to sleep.

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[154] As of 2022, the British prison population was around 90,000 (Sturge, 2022). Of these, only around 0.9% had been convicted of serious crimes (Cuthberston, 2017: 6).

[155] It is debatable if anyone deserves imprisonment. Judges and prosecutors may deserve it more than the 'criminals' whom they routinely convict.

[156] Association time, when prisoners are allowed out of their cells to stretch their legs on the landing and in the yard, is supposed to last an hour, but it is generally much shorter, supposedly due to chronic staff shortage.

Fig. 13 A cell at Wandsworth prison identical to the ones I spent most of my prison sentence in.

A few days later, I was transferred to another wing that was marginally better. The cells in my new wing were similar to the ones I had seen in the wing for new arrivals, but in slightly better condition. The window in my new cell was intact and a bedsheet had been hung to

provide some privacy for the toilet. I met my new cellmate, a young man who had been arrested for assisting a dodgy woman in opening a bank account. Over the following months, I moved to various cells and had different cellmates – some lasted a day, while others stayed for a few months. Most of my cellmates had been imprisoned for selling drugs, a few for theft, others for fraud or forgery, and some for assault.

While some cellmates were nice and kept me company in that hell, others were not the most pleasant. One night, a smelly and mentally unwell homeless man was brought into my cell in the middle of the night – and then was released first thing in the morning[157]. For a week, I shared my cell with a drug addict who smoked spice – also known as the 'zombie drug'[158] – throughout the day. Every day, he would get high and spend the day collapsed on the floor or wherever else he happened to fall. Nonetheless, many cellmates were nice people. I spent entire days playing chess with some and had lengthy conversations with others. They were regular people. Many of them struggled with mental illness – but is it really surprising that individuals in captivity do not fare well?

Drugs are everywhere in prison. Usually, they are sold by prison officers. In a recent interview with *The Guardian*, a spokesperson for the Prison Officers' Association revealed not only that 38% of UK prisoners have tested positive for drugs, but also that those drugs are regularly being introduced in prison and sold by prison officers[159]. The Prison Officers' Association further states that many prison officers rely on drug sales as their primary source of income[160].

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[157] He said the police had picked him up on the streets for no apparent reason and took him to prison for the night because the homeless hostels were full.

[158] This is how a prison officer describes its effects: 'When prisoners are under the influence of spice, it's like watching a maniac zombie movie. People start spinning around, white foam comes out of their mouths and then they collapse. People who take drugs in prison accept the risk they might die.' (https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2023/sep/27/i-have-30-years-experience-prison-officer-feel-fear-every-single-day).

[159] https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2023/sep/27/organised-crime-gangs-uk-sending-recruits-to-train-as-prison-officers-union-warns

[160] Officers affiliated with crime groups are sent to work in prisons to sell drugs. Others become involved with smuggling drugs after becoming prison officers: 'Organised crime groups realise that there's a lot of money to be made by smuggling contraband into prisons. People can be recruited as a prison officer and go into [the jail] with that sole purpose of bringing contraband in, to make a lot of money. They can do it by themselves or for an organised crime group… In the vast majority of prisons, a lot of young staff could be conditioned into bringing stuff in, and other staff come to us with the sole intended purpose of taking stuff in.' (ibid.)

Violence is also rampant in prison, and while some prisoners exhibit violent behaviour due to mental health issues or drug addiction, prison guards are often the most violent individuals within the system. The most glaring form of violence in prison is that perpetrated by the State against vulnerable individuals who have been separated from their communities, families, and friends. These individuals are treated as beasts and locked up in cages. *This* is the violence that one cannot ignore, in prison. This violence is loud, and in-your-face. It is loud like the sound of desperate and unwell prisoners banging on their cells' steel doors at night, shouting, hoping that a prison guard will care to go and see what their problem is[161].

Most prison guards do not perceive the situation in the same way. Many are young[162], and have been conditioned to believe they are constantly facing dangerous and violent criminals[163]. They are inexperienced and uneducated young men and women who are hired and indoctrinated to carry out the violence of the State in our prisons[164]. Physical assaults within prison are predominantly carried out by guards against prisoners[165]. The lack of accountability, combined with the public portrayal of prisoners as dangerous criminals, allows guards to use disproportionate violence. It is also possible that young guards genuinely fear the prisoners they are instructed to view as dangerous and violent. Regardless, prison guards wield virtually-unlimited power over the 'wild beasts' they are tasked with 'protecting the public' from.

Prison governors are often the worst. Like in comparable career paths, the few decent individuals who become prison officers leave as soon as they can, and only the worst ones climb the ladder. Of course, the internal complaint process is designed to shield prison staff from complaints, and those who speak up often face punishment[166]. In prison, 'rehabilitation'

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[161] Response times after pressing the emergency button vary from half an hour to several hours, resulting in prisoners dying or committing suicide while their calls for help go unanswered.

[162] To boost recruitment, the minimum age has been lowered to 18 (see https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2023/sep/27/organised-crime-gangs-uk-sending-recruits-to-train-as-prison-officers-union-warns

[163] Unless they are professional drug dealers who became prison guards to sell drugs, obviously.

[164] Perhaps not unlike what happens with the soldiers Western States recruit to carry out their violence abroad?

[165] I have witnessed prisoners being beaten for speaking up against racist guards.

[166] On one occasion, I found my cell-mate unresponsive on his bed after doing drugs. As this was during association time and the cell doors were open, I ran to the office of the guards to seek help. But they were too busy chit-chatting, and they sent me away. I insisted, and they got angry at me for disturbing them. Fortunately, somebody else called the emergency healthcare team. After pointing out their negligence to the wing governor, I was threatened with disciplinary action. The intervention of the prison librarian saved me from punishment, but I had to promise not to challenge authority again.

means learning to shut up and obey. It means understanding that one's voice will never be heard, and that one is inherently inferior to those in power. It means living in a perpetual state of fear and vulnerability, constantly subjected to the guards and their batons.

3. Becoming animal, in order to become human

Prison is a dehumanizing institution. Yet, such a statement needs unpacking to avoid common misunderstandings. In hindsight, I realized that prior to being in prison, I had no idea of what it felt like to be institutionally 'dehumanized'. The aim of prison is to 'humanize' the wild beasts it holds in its cages, so that they can eventually be released. Thus, the issue is not that dehumanization is unfair or unethical or unpleasant etc. The crucial issue is that the initial dehumanization of the inmates upon their internment is only the starting point of a process that lasts years and sometimes decades, during which inmates have to somehow prove their humanity to their captors in order to be freed.

Dehumanization and re-humanization are delusional concepts, because people never stop being human – yet the delusional nature of de- and re-humanization does not make the inmates' struggle any less real. On the contrary, it makes it harder, because for the inmates, their return to freedom depends on satisfying preposterous requirement which cannot be objectively met or assessed. In practice, the absurdity of the categories of humanity/inhumanity results in the inmates striving to prove their 'humanity' according to whatever their cultural understanding of humanity is.

As a freshly interned prisoner, I was shocked to notice the signs of my lost human status. Perhaps the hardest thing to accept was that I did not have a voice anymore. Once in prison, I noticed the guards would not respond to anything I tried to say. They would either ignore me altogether, or they would shout back as if any polite request or question had been an attempt to cause disturbances and called for disciplinary interventions. I felt treated like an annoying mosquito, or like zookeepers respond to their caged beasts when they make noise. The only people I could have normal conversations with, in prison, were my fellow inmates.

This realization was perhaps particularly difficult for me, given my middle-class and academic background. I viewed myself as an intellectual, a political activist; just prior to my imprisonment, I had been teaching philosophy at the University of California. It was hard for me to comprehend being treated like a piece of dirt by semi-illiterate prison guards. The written responses to my official complaints were full of grammatical errors and barely understandable – if my undergraduate students had submitting work of such poor quality, I would have failed them. The all-powerful prison governor wasn't much brighter: in an interview with the prison's magazine, he revealed that his favourite book was a footballer's biography. Nevertheless, these thoughts of mine only highlight how arbitrary and class-specific[167] it is to order people hierarchically based on their education, intellectualism, or political awareness. Beyond my social circle, people didn't equate intellectualism with humanity.

Reading Foucault's *Discipline and Punish* helped me to make some sense of my environment. Foucault gives a compelling account of the birth and functioning of modern prisons. Prisons, he argues, have remain essentially unchanged since they were established in the early 19th century. They are *penitentiaries*: institutions that apply 'scientifically' the Christian concept of penitence and the disciplinary technologies developed (especially) in monasteries to large number of individuals deemed morally ill and in need of reform or of domestication before they can re-join the moral community. Of course, if prisons are designed to 'humanize' their inmates, they must start by assuming that the inmates are inhuman to begin with.

Foucault highlights that penitentiary institutions are still founded on the principles of prisoner isolation and a strict routine of compulsory work, classroom-based education, sleep, prayer, and sexual abstinence. This has not changed despite the outdated nature of Victorian Christianity, which initially inspired such routines. As prisoners undergo the treatment purportedly designed to 'reform' them, they are constantly monitored by their captors, who are also responsible for their rehabilitation. These captors ultimately decide when the treatment is 'complete' and hence when the prisoner can be released.

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[167] Classist, arguably.

The idea underlying the prison regime is that prisoners ('criminals') are not considered fully 'humans'. They are believed to lack the moral feelings on which the moral (human) community is built. Therefore, the isolation in cells is prescribed to awaken in them the moral feelings that, from a Christian perspective, characterize full humanity. As per an article that appeared in the *Journal des Économistes* in 1842, once isolated in his cells, the convict

> 'descends into his conscience, he questions it and feels awakening within him the moral feeling that never entirely perishes in the heart of man' (in Foucault, 1991: 238).

The mission of the prison is to facilitate the rebirth of former criminals into reformed humans. Certain Christological interpretations view prison cells as temporary tombs from which prisoners can resurrect as fully human (quasi-divine, see Chapter 3) beings. In the words of Abbé Petigny:

> 'What is for an irreligious prisoner merely a tomb, a repulsive ossuary, becomes, for the sincerely Christian convict, the very cradle of blessed immortality' (ibid: 239).

Of course, it is not guaranteed that former criminals will be reborn as humans at the end of their prison sentence. To become humans, prisoners must only develop a moral conscience but also acquire order, structure, and become docile and domesticated. To this purpose, work and routine are crucial to the process of rehabilitation. As the early prison theorist Alphonse Bérenger states, 'by occupying the convict, one gives him habits of order and obedience'. Foucault further comments that

> 'Penal labor must be seen as the very machinery that transforms the violent, agitated, unreflective convict into a part that plays its role with perfect regularity' (ibid: 242).

The making of new men[168], which is the task of the prison, requires that those in charge regularly monitor the progress of their inmates, so that they can be released back into society once the process is complete. In the words of 19th century criminologist Arnould Bonneville:

> 'Just as the prudent physician ends his medication or continues it according to whether the patient has or has not arrived at a perfect cure, so, in the first of these two hypotheses, expiation ought to end with the complete reform of the prisoner; for, in this case, all detention has become useless, and from then on as inhuman to the reformed individual as it is vainly burdensome for the State' (in ibid.: 244).

Prisons were explicitly conceived of as clinics aimed at curing moral illnesses. In *La Réforme des Prisons*, politician Leon Faucher writes:

> 'the penitentiary system… is an induction of the social state. There are moral diseases, as well as breakdowns in health, where the treatment depends on the site and direction of the illness' (in ibid: 249).

It derives from this approach that capillary systems of surveillance of the inmates and classification reflecting their current 'moral health' were developed to support the task of curing their moral disease.

At the same time, an ethnology of 'criminals' also emerged. It was established that 'criminals' are not fully human. Luis Augustine Aimé Marquet de Wasselot writes in *L'Ethnographie des Prisons* in 1841 that

> 'The convicts are …. Another people within the same people; with its own habits, instincts, morals' (in ibid: 253).

Convicts were constructed as inhuman as a matter of 'science'. As Foucault says,

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[168] The prison system has always been focussed on reforming men. Women are less likely to be charged with crimes, and even less likely to be convicted.

> 'another form of life was being articulated upon that of another class and another human species. A zoology of social sub-species… was beginning to emerge' (ibid.)

There are important similarities here with the way in which mental asylums treated[169] their inmates. Psychiatry, too, constructed the category of madness as ontological 'abnormality' to justify the separation and internment of 'mad' people. Furthermore, madness had to be medicalized to justify the existence of institutions dedicated to 'curing' it. Like prison guards, doctors and nurses were charged with monitoring the progress of their inmates. They classified them, assessed their 'improvement' over time and the 'dangers' they posed, and thus judged when they were 'sane' enough to be released.

For the 'mad' people interned in mental asylums, just like for the 'criminals' interned in our prisons, their invisible 'sickness of the soul' and the resulting sub-humanity are the unquestionable bases upon which their internment and institutionalized treatment are justified. To get out, inmates must prove to the institution that they have been 'cured', or 'transformed' – that they have *become* human. Only inmates who have been 'cured' can be safely freed. As many inmates in prisons and mental asylums can attest, trying to argue that one has *never* been a criminal (or mad) does not work[170].

4. A first-person account of my own re-humanization

I suggested above that prisons' constitutive task of (re-)humanizing their inmates requires them to assume their inhumanity to begin with. Thus, prisons strip their inmates not just of their freedom but of their sense of identity, agency, and anything that may represent 'humanity' – as a pre-condition for subsequently applying their standardized technologies of (Christian) humanization ('rehabilitation'). Incoming prisoners must be assumed to be 'animals' by the reformatory technologies designed to instil in them a new, decent, human soul.

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[169] And still treat.
[170] In the UK, parole board generally require prisoners to admit guilt before considering their release. In 21st century Britain, innocent prisoners face life in prison purely for refusing to admit to a crime they have not committed (see https://mojoscotland.org/the-innocent-prisoners-dilemma/)

This initial assumption of 'animality' felt evident in my own experience of prison. Once in prison, my previous identity ceased to matter. I became a mere number – A8803EH – and was given standard-issue prison clothes: a grey tracksuit, a t-shirt (in either grey, red, or blue), along with a few pairs of blue boxer shorts as underwear. Prison-issue clothes were generally oversized to accommodate any body shape. We were issued a fresh set of clothes once a week. In prison, all prisoners look the same, with any traces of personal style and social status eradicated.

Similarly, my daily life as a prisoner was organized by the institution on the unquestioned assumption that I was no different from any of the others – that we were all equally lacking in moral sense, lazy, and semi-illiterate. I was just another animal in need of education, correction, humanization. The process of humanization was uniform for all prisoners. We were assigned jobs within the prison, with guards collecting us from our cells each morning to take us to work, returning us to our cells for lunch, then back to work in the afternoon, and finally back to our cells in time for our 5.30pm dinner. All the jobs were basic and did not require any skills, nor could they possibly teach any (they were mostly cleaning jobs). However, the meagre pay – £2.30 a day[171] – was necessary to purchase additional food to supplement the insufficient meals provided by the prison[172].

Shortly after my arrival, I landed a job in the prison library. The responsibilities mainly involved keeping the library tidy. It was a great job: the library was much quieter than the rest of the prison. Also, prisoners had to be escorted by guards to visit the library, meaning there were rarely any 'customers'. I could open books at random and immerse myself in them. The librarian was one of the few individuals in the entire prison with whom I could engage in interesting conversations, and my colleagues in the prison library included middle-class individuals I could relate to. Working in the library felt like an oasis of semi-normality. All those books felt like an anchor that kept me attached to my previous self, to my humanity. Occasionally, prisoners asked for reading recommendations, and it felt validating beyond

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[171] Information accurate as of March 2021.
[172] Prisons provide inmates with unlimited sliced bread, but very little nutritious food. Inmates working in the kitchens steal the food. What they don't eat, they trade it or sell it (the currency, in prison, are tins of mackerel, which inmates buy from the prison canteen).

words to be suddenly valued for my literary knowledge in a place where I was normally assumed to be a sub-human.

Most of the other activities in prison felt very different from my library job. In most educational courses and other prison jobs I later did, nobody recognized my intellectualism and therefore – *from my perspective* – my 'humanity'. For some time, at Onley prison, my job was to dig holes in the yard with a shovel to remove the dead stumps of some trees that had been chopped off. In the beginning, I was excited to breath more fresh air in a day that I would have normally had access to in a month of prison life. But ultimately, the experience was horrible. It was cold and wet – and with a shovel, it took us a month to do what a real gardener with the right tools could have done in minutes. I was constantly reminded of Solzhenitsyn's account of his time doing forced labour in Soviet gulags[173].

Beyond forced labour, prisoners must also attend a variety of educational activities that are common to all, and invariably useless and demeaning. For example, despite having a degree in Economics, a decade of experience working in finance, and a conviction for supposedly manipulating global financial markets, I had to attend a compulsory 'Money Management' course (Fig. 14). The Money Management course was taught by volunteers from *Christians Against Poverty* – retired Christian ladies clearly affected by 'white saviours' syndrome, who taught how to save money while shopping in supermarkets (such as choosing supermarket brands and looking for special offers).

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[173] As we were digging holes in the rain, I remember the supervisor telling us about 'highly paid' gardening jobs that we could have accessed after prison. After a month of digging, I was awarded a 'Gardening Level 1' prison certificate.
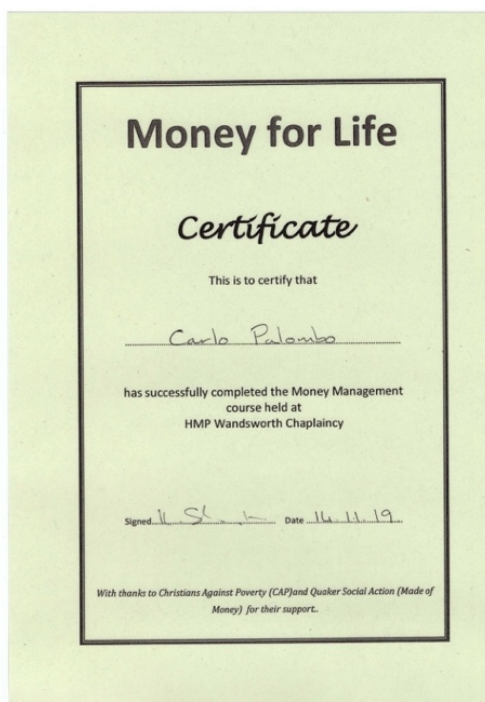
Fig. 14 My certificate for successfully completing the 'Money Management' course in prison

In prison I also found abundance of religious courses. Attendance of religious functions, although optional, is strongly encouraged. On Sundays, going to church was the only way to spend time outside my cell. Bible courses were everywhere[174]. Inmates emotionally broken by the experience of imprisonment are easy prey for the numerous Christian priests, preachers, and volunteers, for whom prisons are abundant hunting grounds[175].

However abhorrent, offensive, or (at best) utterly useless prison's opportunities for 'education' and work-based training are, prisoners are rewarded for working towards their own rehabilitation. Prisoners who have completed what is expected of them, done their prison jobs, and successfully engaged with chaplaincy are classified as 'lower risk'. As they complete courses and receive positive feedback, prisoners progressively qualify for more

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[174] Like many other prisoners, I signed up for some courses. However, I found much of the content to be extremely problematic and upsetting. One class focussed on the persecutions of Christians by 'evil' followers of indigenous cults in parts of Sub-Saharan Africa. We were told that the global spread of Christianity proved the Truth of Jesus' Word – European colonialism was never mentioned as a reason.

[175] Eventually, I discovered that I could register as a Buddhist and participate in silent meditations to avoid Christian evangelism.

visits with friends and family, extended time out of their cells, earn the right to wear their own clothes as opposed to prison uniforms, and are moved to lower security prisons.

In lower-security prisons, inmates rediscover aspects of their previous 'human' life they had forgotten. When I was transferred from Wandsworth prison (a category B prison) to Onley prison (category C), I suddenly realized that prison guards were speaking to me 'normally' and no treating me like a dangerous wild beast. At Onley, I was allowed to walk from my cell to my workplace and back without a guard always escorting me. My cell door remained open for up to two hours a day.

When I was deemed almost ready to be returned to society, as my captors deemed my humanization process successful, I was transferred to a low-security prison in Sussex, HMP Ford (category D). There, my cell door was made of wood instead of steel, and it was never locked. It felt more like a room, albeit basic, unpleasant and dilapidated, rather than a prison cell. The toilet was no longer next to the bed, and I no longer had to use the toilet in front of my cellmates. Instead, there were shared toilets on the landing, which prisoners could use whenever needed. Within the establishment, I could walk around freely. I could even go for a walk in the yard in the middle of the night and gaze at the stars, if I desired. Towards the end of my prison time, when I was considered successfully 'reformed', I was even granted day permits to leave the prison for work and family visits. I was no longer a dangerous wild beast; I was human once again.

5. Humanity and privacy

Different individuals have different understandings of what proves their 'humanity', often reflecting their differential positions in society. As mentioned earlier, intellectualism plays a big part in my own sense of being human – and this may be true for others of similar social background. The animals, for me, are those lacking a critical engagement with the social and power structures they exist in – but I am fully aware that this is definition is as arbitrary and problematic as any other definition of 'animality'.

However, as discussed in previous chapters, there are also broadly-shared cultural and societal ideas on what signifies 'humanity' or 'animality'. In Christianity – and across Abrahamic cultures – humanity is associated with customs designed to hide our naked bodies and bodily ('animal') functions, which are seen as shameful. Nudity and bodily functions are seen as inappropriate to our quasi-divine ('human') status. It is common for modern Westerners, to varying extents, to be ashamed of our nudity and bodily functions. In cultural traditions that trace their beginning to the creation myth of *Genesis*[176], body shame is the characteristics that differentiates humans from animals, and shame is often considered the most characteristic human emotions precisely because by feeling ashamed of our corporeality, we (supposedly) prove our humanity[177],

Modern British prisons were created and organized according to openly Christian (Victorian) principles, and they continue to exist in a society that has not questioned or rejected the Christian/Abrahamic foundations of its humanism. Therefore, it is not surprising that the methods of dehumanization and re-humanization used in prisons rely heavily on the original differentiating factor of humanity: body shame. Humans need privacy, while animals do not. Once we understand the importance of the cultural, religious, and metaphysical belief that 'human needs privacy, while animals do not' in Western (Christian/Abrahamic) humanism, the logic behind allowing prisoners varying degrees of privacy throughout their process of re-humanization becomes clear.

When I first arrived in prison, as an animal yet to start on the path of re-humanization, it was first assumed that I did not need (or deserve) any privacy. In the large holding cell where we were placed upon arrival, about twenty of us shared an unscreened toilet on the floor (Fig 15). In all the cells that I shared with others over the next 14 months, we made makeshift toilet screens made by hanging ripped bedsheets (Fig. 17). When I needed to shit, I had no other option but to do so right next to my cellmate while he was on his bunk watching tv, with my buttocks less than half a metre away from his face. Once, I woke up my lower-bunk cellmate in the middle of the night because I had to shit and, in the process, I let out a loud

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[176] And, similarly, in Islam: see 6.6 below.
[177] However, other mammalian forms of life also feel shame, accordingly to recent science (see Chapter 2).

fart next to his poor sleeping face. Among humans, this would be unthinkable, but it is how humans typically organize spaces for animals.

Fig. 15 Completely unscreened toilet in a common space, in prison.

The toilet in the holding cell where we were kept while waiting to be processed on arrival in prison, looked just like this one

Fig. 16 A prison cell at Wandsworth.

This one is in exceptionally good conditions. Notice the stainless-steel toilet on the floor, next to the bunk bed, and a sink next to it

Fig. 17 Using a prison-issue (green) bedsheet to screen the toilet in a cell.

The toilet is on the floor, just behind the green bedsheet. This set-up, with a green bedsheet used as makeshift toilet screen, was standard in all the cells I lived in

So far, I have only discussed privacy in relation to toilets, but the importance of privacy to the Western concept of humanity extends much further. Privacy protects all the aspects of our lives that must remain hidden for us to be accepted in decent human society. Privacy allows us to engage in what would otherwise be considered shameful for humans, whereas animals are assumed not to feel shame nor require privacy.

A rarely-discussed issue is that of prisoners' masturbation. According to Christianity, masturbation is a sin. In modern Western societies, masturbation remains deeply shameful and *taboo*. People rarely discuss it, and typically engage in it privately. 'Respectable' individuals do not discuss their masturbation habits in public or openly. Public masturbation is criminalized as 'indecent exposure' even in countries like England where public nudity is

legal. Current English criminal laws assume that public self-pleasuring is a form of violence towards others. In 21ˢᵗ century England, Diogenes the Cynic would likely spend his entire life in high-security prisons, labelled as a 'sex offender'[178].

The extreme lack of privacy that comes from sharing a 2m by 3m cell with another person makes masturbation almost impossible. This is particularly true in the sex-negative, homophobic, and emotionally unsafe space of male[179] prisons. Attempting to engage in self-pleasure in my cell felt reminiscent of my adolescence in a sex-negative household. It was a furtive, silent, and rushed act. I would try to discreetly touch my body at night under the blankets, hoping my cellmate was asleep and unaware – which meant the experience was not pleasurable. I would masturbate quickly to release pent-up sexual energy. Perhaps, in prison, masturbation also felt like an act of defiance against my imprisonment – but it was never a joyful or open-hearted act of self-pleasure.

Masturbation in prison felt as shameful as it did when I was a teenager living at home. The privacy that comes with being an adult and having the freedom to choose my own social spaces had made me forget what it feels like to masturbate in a sex-negative setting with others around. I had forgotten how ashamed it feels to have the desire to masturbate when sharing a small space with others who, I assume, are not into shamelessly masturbating around each other and may react badly if I were to suggest an open masturbation policy. In prison, I felt a deep sense of shame for wanting to masturbate. I suppose this means the prison technologies were working according to plan – I was becoming a good Christian.

As my humanization progressed – I did my courses, worked my jobs, the chaplains gave me good feedback, and so my 'risk category' was lowered – I was gradually awarded more privacy. More privacy meant more opportunities for self-pleasure, and better self-pleasure, with less shame. While still at Wandsworth prison, I was transferred to a wing designated for 'good prisoners'. Here, the showers had cubicles with larger doors compared to most other

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[178] I think the real violence is criminalizing and shaming self-pleasure, which hinders self-knowledge, disconnect us from our bodies, and separates us from each other. To counter societal shaming, I advocate for communal self-pleasuring. But this is beyond the scope of this work.
[179] I have been told by external (female) volunteers and read in Cattermole (2019) that things are significantly different in female prisons – but of course I have no direct experience of this.

prison showers. Due to the layout of the shower room, two cubicles offered enough privacy for masturbation. However, the queue for these particular shower cubicles was often very long, requiring me to spend the entire daily 'association time' waiting in the queue instead of enjoying fresh air in the yard. I also had to be quick, as many others were also queueing to have their quick, discreet wank. Still, it was better than nothing, I suppose.

As I continued to be moved to lower-security prisons, privacy and opportunities for masturbation continued to increase. At Onley, I had a single cell for the first time. While it was not completely private (passers-by and guards were still able to look inside my cell through the door flap), I was no longer forced to shit in front of my cellmates, and I could enjoy self-pleasure in a more 'human' (private) space. Towards the end of my sentence, I had access to completely private toilets with full doors and to showers with full-length curtains. The prison guards even started to knock on my cell door before entering, ensuring I was dressed. My re-humanization process was finally complete.

6. The impossible threat of dehumanization: a game of power

I have discussed above some of the prison's technologies for stripping inmates of their identity, autonomy, and their sense of being 'human'. Following Foucault, I suggested that prison dehumanizes prisoners in order to re-birth them as new, 'decent humans' (according to a particular, essentially Christian, understanding of 'decency' and 'humanity'). However, I now want to return to the crucial point I made earlier: the 'dehumanization' of prisoners can never truly be accomplished. Dehumanization functions as *a constant threat*, which hangs over the inmates precisely because it is ultimately impossible to achieve.

In recounting my prison experiences, I mentioned a persistent feeling of dissociation between my own sense of self, which had not changed since entering prison (I still considered myself an intellectual, etc.), and the way in which I was being treated by my jailers and by the volunteers who came to prison to assist with my 'rehabilitation'. While this feeling of dissociation may be stronger in individuals from middle-class backgrounds with no prior experience of being treated like beasts, I believe all inmates have a similar experience. People

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do not view themselves as 'animals' in need of 'rehabilitation'. They do not believe that their soul is faulty and needs 'saving'.

During my time as a prisoner, I had conversations with many other inmates. Not one of them considered himself as an 'animal' or 'subhuman' who needed the 'rehabilitation' process he was forced to undergo. While most prisoners acknowledged that they had engaged in illegal activities, they did not see breaking the law as an indication of 'animality' or 'moral sickness' that needed to be cured through work, routine, and prayer. For example, most drug dealers I encountered were content with their career choice and viewed going to prison as professional risk. Those who regretted their involvement in crime, believed they had made a poor career decision, but they did not perceive their poor career choice as a sign of 'animality' or moral deficiency. Prisoners who had committed violent crimes were more likely to regret their actions, but even they did not consider what they had done as a sign of 'animality' – they generally saw their actions as mistakes, which didn't prove their 'inhumanity'.

Although prisoners' stories are all different, a common theme is the immense and unbridgeable gap between how the penitentiary institution treats its prisoners – as animals or sub-humans with flawed souls in need of 'humanization' – and how prisoners perceive themselves – as ordinary individuals trapped in a dystopian parallel universe. Prisoners know full well that they do not suddenly become 'animals' upon entering prison. They cannot be dehumanized and then rehumanized; they remain the same humans they have always been.

In Chapter 3, I highlighted the political nature of the Christian and humanist concept of humanity, starting with its initial appearance in *Genesis* 1:26: God created humankind 'so that they could rule over' the animals. Likewise, societal and cultural constructs that view certain individuals or social groups as sub-humans function to justify their domination by those who claim full humanity. Those in a position of power often remain unaware of the underlying operations of power that enable their social dominance – they may genuinely believe in their ontological superiority and see their use of power as being in the collective interest. However, to the oppressed who face the threat of dehumanization, the situation is much clearer. They see their dehumanization as an arbitrary ideological construct that justifies their unjust and equally arbitrary disempowerment/oppression. It is a power struggle.

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In the first chapter of this work, I noted Foucault's emphasis on the fact that 'where there is power, there is resistance' (see 1.6). In prison, resistance to power is particularly evident. When prisoners, who have always thought of themselves as human, find themselves in a system that institutionally treats them as 'animals' in the sense of Christian metaphysics, as beings requiring both physical and sexual restraint, needing to be taught discipline over their urges, and requiring 'civilization' and instruction in 'morality' – their natural response is to assert and reassert their humanity in any way they can or know of. They strive for their captors to recognize the humanity they believe they have never lacked, and that no institution or technology of domination could have taken away from them.

Although the reason why prisoners feel they never lacked 'humanity' (and why this 'humanity' cannot be taken away from them) is that humanity is an ideological construct that only makes sense within humanist metaphysics, prisoners have no easy way to make their case. Inmates are trapped within a highly bureaucratic prison system, which operates under the assumption that inmates are sub-human and need to be fixed and re-humanized. They cannot have meaningful conversations with prison officers and governors who treat them like wild beasts. They are unable to challenge the logic of the system and must instead accept it and learn to speak the same language of the institution. Like inmates in mental asylums trying desperately to prove their sanity to psychiatrists and nurses who assume they are mad, prisoners put in great effort to demonstrate to their jailers that they are not the animals the institution assumes them to be.

Dylan Rodríguez's book *Forced Passages: Imprisoned Radical Intellectuals and the U.S. Prison Regime*, seeks to give voice to politically-aware and intellectual prisoners in the U.S. It examines the resistance against the brutal violence inflicted upon them by the State. In his interviews with prisoners, Rodríguez finds that they all emphasize one point: despite the attempts by the prison system and public discourse to dehumanize them, they assert their ordinary, normal, humanity. They reject the notion that they need to be 'corrected' or 'rehabilitated'. Political prisoner Viet Mike Ngo sums it up by saying,

'We are ordinary. We are human' (Rodríguez, 2006: 36).

This may seem evident to those who have experienced prison firsthand, but it contradicts the logic of the institution. It also challenges the beliefs propagated by public discourse surrounding crime, law, and prison. When I share my experience of prison with others, they often ask me what it was like to be surrounded by 'criminals', expecting me to recount frightening experiences of living in a cage with dangerous beasts. However, as I noted at the beginning of this chapter, nothing could be further from the truth. Similarly, Rodríguez tells of PhD student Martha Escobar who had the opportunity to work as an educator in a prison. Escobar recalls her initial meeting with the 'criminals' she was supposed to 'educate':

> 'When we walked into the room, and there were guys already there… they were friendly and smiling and shockingly normal-looking people. It's like being on jury duty or something, and there's this large cross section of human beings, except everyone's wearing the same thing. That's really the only difference' (ibid.: 96)

Prisoners' resistance, Rodríguez argues (ibid: 159), is essentially about rejecting the logic of dehumanization of the institution, to prove their humanity. Along similar line to my discussion in the previous section, Rodríguez stresses 'the prison regime's productive incapacity to *actually* dehumanize':

> 'Dehumanization, in other words, is a constitutive logic of the regime, a modality of its domination and dominion, not its definitive or empirical outcome' (ibid.:149)

The prisoners' human status thus becomes the terrain of the struggle that opposes the institution with its brutal violence and the prisoners who try to resist. Philosopher Lewis Gordon rightly notes that 'institutionalized dehumanization is fundamentally a state of war' (ibid: 158).

For the radical intellectuals interviewed by Rodríguez, resistance against institutionalized dehumanization often involves thinking and theorizing. Kept captive within institutions that do not allow them any real possibility to resist, they 'resist' by protecting their identity as intellectuals, as political activists, as 'humans'. Imprisoned intellectuals generate

> 'a body of social thought that antagonizes and potentially disrupts the structuring logic of their own civic and social death' (ibid.: 110).

To imprisoned intellectuals, their very production of social thought proves their enduring humanity. I resonate with this, as I noted above. In my own experience of prison, I staunchly protected my self-identity as a radical intellectual by spending most of my free time thinking, theorizing, and writing. Although – of course – nobody cared, it was my very own way to prove my humanity (my superiority over the 'animals') and to try to resist the logic of dehumanization of the institution.

7. 'Only animals are naked'

Although most prisoners do not identify as radical intellectuals, comparable attempts to resist the logic of dehumanization of the prison regime are common among prisoners. The difference is that prisoners have different understandings of what makes them 'human' and thus different ways of asserting their humanity against the institution's attempt to dehumanize them. I was raised in an academic family, and therefore I was taught that the signs of my 'humanity' were my education and intellectual capabilities – the 'animals' were those who did not read books. And so, in prison, I read books and theorized – much like the prisoners interviewed by Rodríguez. But I was an exception: most prisoners are uneducated and come from the lowest social classes. They have a very different understanding of what separates humans from animals. For many, I suggest, clothedness and body shame play an important role in defining humanity, alongside ideas around the control of sexual instincts and desires.

A general rule is that people believe in their own humanity and projects animality (sub-humanity) onto others. Most, if not all, of the inmates I spoke to during my time in prison did not question the metaphysical division between 'humans' and 'animals'. They were not interested in the broader philosophical problem (whenever I tried to raise the issue in conversation, I think people thought I was weird). Instead, they accepted the established

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distinction between humanity and animality, but they claimed that *they* were the humans and projected animality and sub-humanity onto others.

Against the ideological premise of the prison, according to which criminals are sub-humans or animals because their criminal conduct is evidence of a faulty or sick soul, many prisoners sought to differentiate between different types of criminals. While nobody saw the crime they had committed as evidence of a sick or faulty soul, there was general agreement that 'sexual offenders' were indeed animals or sub-humans. Commenting on an article he was reading in *The Sun*, my Guinean cellmate once suggested that those engaging in public sex are animals who do not know shame and are 'disgusting'. He protested the injustice of having been incarcerated for providing fake landlord references to immigrants seeking to rent flats, but he was a vocal supporter of the death penalty for paedophiles.

Many inmates agreed on the 'animality' of sex offenders – of 'perverts'. To them, highlighting the animality of perverts was probably a way to assert the humanity of all the other 'criminals' who had been convicted of non-sexual offences – that is, their own humanity. For similar reasons, common criminals regularly attack sex offenders, if given the chance. By beating perverts, perhaps, common criminals assert their own humanity and their difference from the 'real animals' (the perverts). One day a rapist was sent to our wing of common criminals – perhaps by mistake, or perhaps because they did not have space in the sex offenders wing. His identity as a rapist was revealed when another inmate saw him on television. Within a couple of hours, the rapist had faced the righteous anger of a group of common inmates and had to be taken to the hospital.

In a social world where sexuality and animality are seen as closely related, among inmates who hold on to Abrahamic and humanist ideas of humanity as sort-of-disembodied and involving sexual self-control (as opposed to the perverts' animality), it is hardly surprising that nudity is unwelcome. I cannot know for sure what went through the mind of the inmate who punched me in the shower, but I suspect it had to do with protecting the safety of the common, 'human' space from perverts like me – with enforcing the separation between humans and animals.

The underworld I encountered in prison, in this respect, perhaps helps to understand power dynamics that take place in the outside world too, but which, there, may appear less evident. It is common for variously oppressed individuals and social groups to claim full humanity for themselves by accusing others of being sub-humans or animals. And, as I discuss in the chapters that follow, it is also normal for oppressed people to focus on the alleged 'perversion' of the other as evidence of their animality. The close connection in Christian (humanist, Abrahamic, etc.) metaphysics between flesh, nudity, uncontrolled sexual desires, and animality means that our naked corporeality is easily co-opted in games of power. People seeking to increase their relative power often turn against the alleged animality of others – and in Western societies nudity and sexuality provide an easy and established reason to accuse others of animality and hence to highlight one's own 'human' status.

8. On prison toilets and me

My critique of the way in which Abrahamic and humanist ideals of human disembodiment and sexual self-control are co-opted in games of power between individuals or groups, seeking to assert their own 'fuller' humanity may suggest that I see myself as an objective observer, capable of seeing through those games of power and the ideological/metaphysical/religious beliefs on which they rely. Unfortunately, this is not quite the case. Usually, the ideological order has been internalized by the members of a society to such an extent that not only is it invisible to most (the 'obviousness' of ideology I discussed in Chapter 2), but even those who see it are often trapped within it. I end this chapter by problematizing my own relationship with my animal flesh as I experienced it in prison, which I think shows how complicated it is to truly reject the existing, established order of things.

In prison, I didn't feel much shame for showering naked. However, I did feel uncomfortable showering naked among half-clothed people. After being attacked, showering naked made me feel afraid for my physical and emotional safety. Despite this, I do not think I felt 'shame' – maybe because shame is the emotion associated with the fear of losing belonging, and the only belonging I could have lost by showering naked was belonging to the prisoners' community, to which I didn't belong (or want to belong) anyway. In any case, I wasn't particularly 'ashamed'.

However, there were other situations in prison where I couldn't let go of my internalized feelings and of shame. Specifically, I want to discuss my struggle with shame when it came

to shitting in front of other inmates. I realized that my relationship with my own flesh and bodily shame was going to be more complicated than I had anticipated as soon as I arrived in prison. I mentioned earlier that upon my arrival, I was placed in a holding cell with around 20 other new prisoners. The holding cell had an unscreened toilet in a corner that we could use if needed. At that moment, I wasn't contemplating the philosophical significance of the unscreened toilet: I just really, *really* hoped I wouldn't need a poo while waiting.

As the guards escorted me to my first prison cell, I discovered that the open-toilet arrangement I saw in the holding cell for new arrivals was the norm. As mentioned earlier, my cell had a bunk bed and an unscreened toilet on the floor right next to my new cellmate, who was casually watching TV. If I needed to pee, I could face away from him while using the toilet; it didn't feel uncomfortable. However, when I needed to defecate, I had no choice but to do so right next to him. At most, I could have asked him to turn around for a few minutes and to face the other way – and hope my poo was not going to smell *too* badly, or for too long.

I have no problems with public nudity, but, honestly, shitting in front of others felt uncomfortable. After spending a few days in that initial cell (which I later learned was in a wing for temporary housing of new arrivals and therefore kept in *particularly* poor conditions), I was transferred to a cell in a regular wing. In regular wings, inmates stay for longer periods of time, so they make their cells as comfortable as possible. They use prison-issue green bedsheets to screen the toilets (Fig 17). Living in a cell with a curtained-off toilet made a significant difference, but of course a makeshift toilet curtain does not conceal smells or noises. Even with the luxury of a hanging bedsheet to provide some privacy, shitting still felt *very* uncomfortable in those shared cells measuring 2m by 3m, which were stuffy and had windows that did not fully open[180],.

I am interested in reflecting on this discomfort because it took me by surprise. In my theoretical reflections before my imprisonment, I believed that feeling ashamed of our excretory functions was silly. I saw that shame as similar to the shame people feel around nudity: excretory functions are evidence of our animal nature, and that is why in a Christian (or humanist, Islamic, etc.) culture we must conceal them and feel ashamed. Humans, quasi-

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[180] For security reasons.

divine beings, should not be seen or heard shitting – especially if their poo is smelly. In the normal world outside of prison, many people are so afraid of being judged simply for defecating (for the smell of their poo, for the farts they may let out on the toilet, etc.) that they develop anxiety disorders and refuse to even use public toilets (the regular ones: with cubicles and doors), just in case someone overhears them and becomes aware of their underlying animality[181].

As a young aspiring social theorist, I wanted to challenge this discomfort. I enthusiastically read Molotch and Norén's book, *Toilet: Public Restrooms and the Politics of Sharing* (2010). I dreamed of revisiting the Romans' communal public toilets where people conversed with strangers while defecating together, sitting on toilet seats/benches arranged in a square-shape, without dividers (Kamash, 2010). The iconic scene in Luis Buñuel's film, *The Phantom of Liberty*, where dinner guests dine on toilets kept coming to my mind. When renovating a house purchased with my then-girlfriend many years ago, I insisted on installing a large clear glass door in our main bathroom, which provided no privacy for those using the toilet[182]. Before my imprisonment, I considered myself an advocate for open-toilets as much as for nudity; in fact, I believed the two issues were closely connected.

I still believe the connection between the secrecy of the body and that of our excretory functions are closely intertwined. Theoretically, I support public defecation just like I support public nudity, for essentially the same reasons. However, in prison, I struggled to reconcile my theoretical commitment with the uncomfortable reality of shitting on an exposed toilet next to my cellmate. Showering naked didn't bother me, but shitting in front of others did. Why was this? I should mention that I don't mind pooing next to friends or family – I like the intimacy of sharing our excretory functions with loved ones. But why is it that, in prison, I could not quite get over my discomfort?[183]

My hypothesis is that some forms of shame have become deeply internalized, making it incredibly difficult to let go of them – especially when we feel unsafe in our environment. I

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[181] https://www.healthline.com/health/anxiety/pooping-in-public#anxiety-and-phobia
[182] We had another, private bathroom for guests who didn't want to be exposed on the toilet.
[183] Also, it may be interesting to note that I was completely unbothered by my cell-mates shitting next to me.

suspect that the reason for my enduring shame was that I couldn't convince myself that my cellmates would be okay with hearing and smelling my excrements. I assumed they would dislike me and reject me, and I cared about not being disliked or rejected by my cellmate, hence the shame-response. This is different from the emotions I felt during my naked showers, where I couldn't quite believe that people would dislike me for showering naked. In any case, I want to emphasize that letting go of internalized shame is difficult. Shame remains a powerful force that keeps people attached to the established social order, often going *against* their consciously-held beliefs and against their will – as was the case with my experience of public shitting in prison.

Conclusion: death as freedom?

In *If This Is a Man*, Auschwitz survivor Primo Levi writes that in Nazi extermination camps, prisoners were stripped naked before being gassed. Along with their clothes, naked prisoners lost their last remnant of humanity. Naked prisoners are seen as animals; therefore, they can be killed – from a Christian/humanist perspective, it is not immoral to kill animals. Nazi camps are extreme examples of prisons, but the underlying principle is the same as what I have been exploring in this and the previous chapter. It originates directly from the first book of *Genesis,* and it has general applicability across Western societies. The prison system assumes that the inmates are ontologically sub-human/animal-like. The treatment of prisoners aligns with this assumption.

In my experience of male prisons, nudity was unwelcome among prisoners. Prisoners showed a strong attachment to their clothing and clothedness, going so far as to shower with their underwear on and to resort to violence to protect the clothedness of the space. In this chapter, I proposed that (perhaps) the reason for this attachment to clothedness in prison stems from the constant threat of 'dehumanization', which leads to a resistance. This resistance manifests itself in the attachment prisoners develop to anything that, to them, signifies their humanity. For many inmates raised in Abrahamic cultures, including Levi's fellow prisoners, clothedness is a significant indication of their humanity, as '*only animals are naked*'.

When people feel unsafe and perceive a threat to their 'human' status and relative power (or safety), they turn to whatever symbols they believe prove their humanity. In this sense, the underwear worn by inmates during showers serves the same purpose, psychologically and socially, as a Western suit and tie does for colonized natives (see Chapter 3). Those who feel their status is under threat redirect any charge of 'animality' onto others – the 'real' animals – by asserting their own 'human' status. In Western societies, the Biblical and humanist ideal of humanity as disembodied and capable of sexual self-control often leads to power dynamics where individuals seeking to protect or elevate their status accuse others of being 'rapists' or 'perverts'. Nudity is frequently viewed as evidence of perversion or of the intention to commit rape, as decent humans would not otherwise have reasons to be naked. The man who punched me in the shower justified his actions by claiming that he thought I wanted to rape him.

If this perspective is correct, then perhaps nudity is only possible among people who have been completely, *successfully* dehumanized – where any attachment to a fantasy of humanity has become futile or materially impossible. Levi suggests that something like this occasionally occurred in Nazi death camps, with the case of *Musselmänner*. *Musselmänner* were considered the living dead – inmates who, though still alive, had given up on life and were merely waiting for death. Levi describes them as

> 'an anonymous mass, continually renewed and always identical, of non-men who march and labour in silence, the divine spark dead within them, already too empty to really suffer. One hesitates to call them living' (1987: 101).

Musselmänner were reduced to mere physical functions, bodies devoid of the 'soul' that renders them 'human'. In his book, *Man's Search for Meaning*, Auschwitz and Dachau survivor and psychoanalyst Viktor Frankl describes the struggle of concentration camp inmates between life and death, humanity and animality, in terms that are similar, although of course more extreme, to my own account of prison:

> 'Under the influence of a world which no longer recognized the value of human life and human dignity, which had robbed man of his will and had made him an object to

be exterminated… – under this influence the personal ego finally suffered a loss of values. If the man in the concentration camp did not struggle against this in a last effort to save his self-respect, he lost the feeling of being an individual, a being with a mind, with inner freedom and personal value. He thought of himself then as only a part of an enormous mass of people; his existence descended to the level of animal life.' (1964: 49)

For inmates, it was imperative to remain attached to their 'human dignity', however they understood it. Frankl recalls the advice he received early in his captivity from a more experienced prisoner:

'shave daily, if at all possible, even if you have to use a piece of glass to do it… even if you have to give your last piece of bread for it' (1964: 17)

Like shaving, clothedness played a crucial role in concentration camp inmates' attachment to their humanity. Frankl tells us that the descent into 'animality' of *Musselmänner* began with inmates refusing the wear clothes:

'Usually it began with the prisoner refusing one morning to get dressed and wash' (1964: 74)

For concentration camp inmates, becoming a *Musselmann* usually resulted in physical death:

'The prisoner who had lost faith in the future – his future – was doomed. With his loss of belief in the future, he also lost his spiritual hold; he let himself decline and became subject to mental and physical decay' (ibid.)

If natural physical death did not come first, the uselessness of *Musselmänner* as camp workers meant they were left to starve or gassed. However, it is important to note that Nazi concentration camps represent extreme situations. A question worth asking is whether the much safer circumstances of my middle-class European life allow for a *deliberate* choice of civic and social death, of something akin to becoming a *Musselmann*. I propose the idea of

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choosing social death as a form of politics, as a means to achieve a freedom that seems otherwise unattainable among humans or those aspiring to be humans. In his book *Habeas Viscus*, Alexander Weheliye explores the relationship between *Musselmänner* and humanity, posing the question:

> 'How might we go about imagining not a disembodied ethics in which the *Musselmann* serves as template for the inhuman in the human but the very process of becoming-*Musselmann* as a form of politics? (2014: 119).

I do not have an answer to this question, yet. For now, I will park it – I may be able to revisit this question later. In the next chapter, I will discuss my adventures trying to introduce nudity into my everyday life, after my release from prison.

Chapter 5: My naked body goes out into the world. Am I a monster?

> *'When fear comes in the door, truth flies out of the window.'*
> *(proverb)*

Introduction/1

In the summer of 2022, following my release from prison, I joined a group of naturist activists for naked outings around London, such as bike rides and picnics in public parks. As discussed in Chapter 2, public nudity is not illegal in England, however, to be safe, the organizers – the London Naturist Meetup and the Naturist Action Group (NAG) – had informed the police of our activities, and the police had no concerns.

Contrary to the popular annual London Naked Bike Ride, where thousands of people attend and there is a festive atmosphere, our small group of people, unexpectedly naked in normal everyday settings, was *not* met with cheers. During a small naked bike ride in Romford, Essex[184] (attended by about 15 of us), a man – white, in his 40s, driving a large Porsche SUV – threatened to run us over. He yelled through his rolled-down window that we were endangering and traumatizing the children in their community. He felt he had to protect the community from us perverts[185].

Fig. 18 At the Romford Naked Bike Ride, 2022   (I am the second from the left)

We experienced similar reactions from the public in *all* our naked rides. At one event in East London, as we were getting ready for the ride, a woman (white, in her 30s) confronted me. Again, she shouted her concerns about hypothetical 'children' who may see us naked and be traumatized. She insisted that we get dressed immediately, before 'any children' saw us. As I tried to reason with her, she claimed that we were breaking the law and called the police.

While we were moving on to a second assembly point to wait for more participants to join, a young man approached us and told us to get dressed, claiming that we were breaking the law[186]. We explained to him that we were not breaking the law, but he still insisted that we

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[184] A video of the ride is available at: https://www.newsflare.com/video/508613/the-first-romford-naked-bike-ride-gets-of-to-a-luckluster-start.
[185] Thankfully, on that occasion, the police intervened to protect us.
[186] This is particularly ironic given that this was a Traveller who had set up camp illegally on public land.

dress because he was worried children might see us and be traumatized. When I tried to question his claims about the traumatic effects on children from seeing naked bodies, he assaulted me. He kicked my bike and then, as I fell to the ground, he kicked me, broke my phone, and threw my backpack into the river[187].

Shortly after, while my wounds were still bleeding, another man (black, in his 50s) came and confronted us. By now, the story gets a bit boring: he was furious about the 'danger' our nudity posed to 'local children'. He called the police.

On another occasion, at a different naked event in East London, I was confronted by a man (black, in his 40s) about 'us perverts' exposing our naked bodies where children might see us. Instead of immediately calling the police, this man seemed momentarily willing to engage in a conversation, so I tried to ask him about his fears. He informed me that scientific evidence shows that children are traumatized by the sight of naked bodies, and that exposure to nudity causes developmental damages. I questioned his sources and presented the alternative viewpoint that it is the prohibition and shaming of our bodies that is traumatic – perhaps exposure to the forbidden is unsettling because it forces people to confront their own trauma, I suggested. He lost his temper. Having learned from past experiences, I quickly made my escape before his kicks could reach me.

In other instances, people felt so threatened by our nudity that they called the police without engaging with us directly. Once, while gathering in a suburban car park as we waited for other participants to arrive (putting sun cream on, chatting), a woman in a stationary car called the police. While waiting for the police to arrive, she remained in her car, talking on her phone, watching us suspiciously. When the police arrived, they explained to her that we were not doing anything wrong; they wished us a good day. However, it is the woman's reaction that interests me: she appeared *genuinely* frightened. She never approached us and remained in her car with doors and windows shut. I don't believe she was excessively concerned for her own safety, as she could have easily driven away. But she was must have

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[187] Does publicly hitting someone set a better example for children than being naked?

been worried about the safety of *her community*, prompting her to call the police and wait for them.

It is highly likely that many other people have called the police on me, frightened by my nudity, without my knowledge. Clearly, my naked body instils *fear* in people. They see my naked body as a *monster* which endangers their communities.

Introduction/2

In October 2022, a few months after the episodes I mentioned above, I presented my theoretical understanding of nakedness/clothedness (the content of Chapters 2 and 3) to my PhD colleagues in a seminar at Birkbeck's department of Psychosocial studies. I discussed the discomfort many people feel when confronted with nudity, proposing that it stems from a disruption of the religious order which organizes our social world (as discussed in Chapter 2) and the role of clothedness in Western constructs of humanity (as explored in Chapter 3). To illustrate my points, I took off my clothes and presented my ideas while naked. This had been prearranged and consent had been obtained from both the department and the participants. I asked people to observe their discomfort in response to my nudity, aiming to create an uncomfortable yet safe space for exploring our unease with nudity. I also invited my audience to join me in nudity (fully or partially – as and when they wished), to play with their discomfort from different perspectives. However, nobody accepted my invitation. I then proceeded with my discussion on nudity – while being naked myself.

The presentation did not go well. The audience responded with anger. Never before had I witnessed such a negative and furious reaction to an academic talk, and I was emotionally unprepared for it. The main criticism was that mine was a white and cis-gendered male perspective, which disregarded the experiences of women, non-white, and trans people. I am a white (Italian[188]) cis-male (I am also middle-aged[189] and middle-class, although nobody in

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[188] Racial categories are context-specific. In England, Italians are perceived to be white. In the U.S., I would be seen as less white.
[189] I was 44 years old, in 2022.

the audience commented on that[190]). As a white cis-male, my audience agreed[191], I belong to the oppressor class. Therefore, instead of attempting to theorize about experiences of oppression that I cannot possibly understand from my privileged standpoint, I should listen to those who *truly* experience oppression.

According to my audience, our everyday forced imposition of clothes does not constitute oppression or unfreedom. And if it did, in any case, it is women and black and trans folks who should raise the issue – not a white cis-male like me. They argued that the oppressed wear clothes to protect themselves from the violence perpetrated by white cis-men. Many saw me as a member of the oppressor class trying to claim a share of victimhood by raising the preposterous claim that the prohibition of nudity is oppressive, whereas in fact, they said, it exists to protect the oppressed (women, non-whites, etc.) from the violence of white cis-men[192].

The women in my audience were particularly outraged. They *all* agreed that clothedness is a *necessary* response to male sexual violence. Male predatory behaviour[193] *forces* women to embrace clothing to protect themselves, apparently. Similarly, I was told, society forces men to remain clothed to ensure women's safety. Even though I may not be a sexual predator, I nonetheless belong to the class of sexual predators. It is because of people like me that women must conceal their bodies. The prohibition of nudity has nothing to do with the nonsense I discussed in Chapters 2 and 3 – it ensures women's safety in a patriarchal world – and if I had any idea of what it is like to be anything other than a white cis-man, I would know it.

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[190] Academic discourse these days focuses on race and gender, not age or class.

[191] If someone disagreed, they kept quiet about it – which is the same, ultimately.

[192] The criticism came from women and non-white people. None of the white men attacked me, they remained silent – they may have been too scared to intervene due to the anger displayed by the women towards my 'white cis-male privilege' and 'white male tendency to make truth claims about others'. One man later told me that he had found my talk interesting. However, the public reaction was so brutal and negative that I question whether those who privately said nice things to be afterwards, did so genuinely. At the time I accepted the niceties without further questions.

[193] Whether the criticism is due to patriarchal culture or violence inherent in maleness is irrelevant to the argument. Arguably, rejecting the culture vs nature dichotomy means the two views converge.

Because of my white cis-maleness, I cannot appreciate how dangerous the world is for those who have female bodies. I have not been repeatedly traumatized by predatory men: and this is why I can afford to philosophize about nudity instead of being afraid of it. My love for the work of white male European theorists (Foucault, Agamben, Durkheim, Nietzsche) further exposes, in my audience's view, my inability to go beyond my white cis-male perspective[194].

Many found my nudity upsetting. Some questioned the value of the consent they had given to my experimental presentation, because of the social power imbalance between me as a white cis-male and them as women or non-whites. Rather than my nudity *per se*[195], several people said they found upsetting the fact that I *could* be naked: whereas no woman or non-white person would ever feel safe enough to do the same. They argued that nudity is 'not inclusive'.

Not only is nudity simply too dangerous for women and non-white folks, but, according to my colleagues, it is also trans-exclusionary. My invitation to the audience to join me in being naked was dismissed as proof of my inability to see from non-cis-gendered perspective. Many people said they chose to remain clothed in solidarity with values of trans-inclusivity which are (*supposedly*) incompatible with nudity. By being naked in an academic environment, I was flaunting my privilege and excluding others. Many said they found this flaunting of privilege to be *very* upsetting. To them, I was showing off my privilege to an audience who, for the most part, did not have the privilege to experiment with nudity.

Some colleagues also disagreed with my claim that the prohibition of nudity was imposed across the world by Christian/European colonizers[196]. They said my views were factually incorrect, and neo-colonial. Individuals of Jamaican and African descent accused me of erasing their rich cultural heritage in matters of dress, which was proof that their ancestors were clothed even prior to the arrival of the Europeans. They informed me that my idea of nudity being unproblematic before the arrival of the Europeans was a later construct by colonizers attempting to establish their moral/ontological superiority. By perpetuating such

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[194] In the rest of this work, I will mainly rely on the work of women and non-white theorists, to accommodate the identity politics fanatics in academia.

[195] Many said that after the initial awkwardness, my nudity became unnoticeable. Agamben (2011b: 90) notes that this is what typically happens when the veil is lifted, and nudity is revealed.

[196] And by Muslim colonizers, to a much smaller extent.

'racist colonial beliefs', I offended and re-traumatized the non-white members of my audience.

Some people were upset by my reference to the Biblical story of *Genesis*. They questioned my use of 'ancient mythical fables', which are no longer widely believed, to explain modern universal societal norms.

Given the intense and angry reaction to my nude seminar presentation, it is crucial that I prioritize genuine *listening*. The objections raised against me are – I believe – unfounded, and I will not dwell on them. I think they stemmed from an affective response, and this affective reaction was expressed using the language of contemporary academic discourse. Surely, PhD students in Psychosocial Studies possess enough critical understanding to recognize the folly of their arguments, had it not been for a sudden and collective affective response. As I sought to explore our discomfort and shame surrounding nudity, I ceased to be perceived as an academic colleague. Instead, I was viewed as an enemy – as a monster ('privilege-blind colonial oppressor white cis-man' is the academic definition of monster). The audience united in a self-righteous defence against me – the monster.

When I was assaulted for showering naked in prison, I initially attributed it to the exceptional environment of prison, its dehumanizing technology, its inherent lack of safety – which easily triggers people's defensive instincts. I spent a great deal of time, in my prison cell, theorizing about that incident. I also blamed what happened on the individual who had punched me – in all honesty, I never quite stopped seeing him as a young, ignorant brute. But I was not quite prepared for the reactions my nudity continued to elicit in people, even in the outside world – and for the ensuing violence that was unleashed upon me. I did not anticipate being perceived as a dangerous, scary monster, an enemy of the community.

I did not understand. To try to understand, I brought the discussion to my university colleagues – and even there, I received a similar reaction. My nudity caused violent, enraged reactions in others regardless of their background, gender, race, education, age. Social background and education only influenced the *way* people expressed their rage – instead of being called 'paedophile' and 'pervert', my colleagues referred to me as a 'privileged white

cis-man' – yet the *meaning* was essentially the same. I was perceived as a public enemy, a *monster*. Although my colleagues did not physically harm me, the violence directed towards me was perhaps even worse[197].

In this chapter, I attempt to make sense of the reactions that my nudity elicits in people. I want to understand those affective reactions by focussing on the underlying similarities between ostensibly different responses I experienced in different contexts (in the streets vs. in academia). However, I find myself facing a dilemma. On the one hand, the affective force of the reactions to my non-conforming behaviour leaves no space for rational discussion; individuals are not prepared to question the beliefs that validate their fears and emotional responses (such as labelling me as a rapist, paedophile, privileged-white-cis-man, etc.). On the other hand, I must listen to people, without dismissing their views, if I want to explore ways to free body in ways that are respectful of others, inclusive, and safe. How do I seek inclusion in a society that perceives me as a rapist/paedophile/monster/enemy/oppressor?

This chapter is structured as follows. I start by stating my unwillingness to believe in monsters/enemies/oppressors and thus to see clothedness as necessary protection against them (section 1). I then consider many females' problematic relationship to their bodies (sections 2 and 3), which I understand as the product of a traumatic socialization into compliance (section 4). I suggest that males also undergo similar (albeit different) processes: the socialization of boys and girls into body-shame contributes to the perpetuation of societal norms (sections 5, 6, 7). Subsequently, I shift my focus to the feelings of fear, discomfort, and perceived danger that reinforce the *taboo* around nudity across society (section 8). I problematize the public fear of 'flashers' as largely ideological (sections 9, 10). I suggest that the media has played a role in creating a moral panic surrounding 'indecent exposure' (section 11). While I acknowledge that people genuinely fear ideological 'dangers' (section 12), I propose that such fears ultimately ensure their obedient conformity (section 13).

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[197] Several people apologized to me after the event, but it was too late. In public, at least, passers-by sometimes defended me – whereas in my department, everyone united against me like a mob, without a single voice speaking in my defence.

1. Premise: against 'enemies' and 'monsters'

My starting point is that the criticisms raised against me during my academic talk were preposterous. I consider them briefly here before moving onto the discussion I really want to have – around constructions of the excluded Other (the body) as monstruous/dangerous.

The notion that 'I am comfortable with nudity *because* I am a white cis-man' is absurd. Based on my personal and professional[198] experience, white cis-men are as ashamed of being seen naked as women and non-whites. There is no significant correlation between gender/race and lack of body-shame[199].

It is clearly false that public nudity is safer for men than it is for women, as evidenced by the abuse I endured. Female nudity attracts unwanted attention (cat-calling, advances, etc.), but men are assumed to be paedophiles or perverts, and may even be arrested. Nudity is *not safe* for men either.

The suggestion that nudity is trans-exclusive is similarly ludicrous. Anecdotally, it was dismissed by all my friends in the trans and queer community to whom I mentioned it. In my own experience, the transgender community is *far more* body-positive and pro-nudity compared to non-queer, cis-gendered spaces. The underlying assumption that queering gender/sex requires the use of clothing to disrupt the (natural?) binary is problematic to say the least.

It is even more preposterous to propose that universally enforced clothedness protects women and non-whites from white cis-male violence. Universally enforced clothedness originated in Europe during the Christian era and became prevalent particularly after the Middle Ages and during Victorian times. Modesty culture is generally – globally and historically – strongly correlated to patriarchal oppression. To present it as a feminist response against patriarchy is nonsensical.

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[198] I work as a sex and intimacy therapist.
[199] Although, generally, men find it harder than women to acknowledge their shame.

It is false that European colonizers fabricated accounts of indigenous people 'lacking body shame' – that the status of public nudity was generally the same across pre-colonial societies as in Christian/European/post-colonial ones. I had never encountered this perspective prior to my seminar talk, and I have found no evidence supporting it in subsequent searches.

Such arguments make no sense, and I will not discuss them further. They are as ludicrous as my fellow inmate's suggestion that by showering naked I was 'trying to rape him', or that my cycling naked with other naturist activists meant I was a 'paedophile' endangering local children. I am completely uninterested in discussing whether nudity is trans-exclusive or whether Columbus made up the nudity of the 'Indians'.

Instead, I want to discuss the fact that my nudity turned me into an enemy – a monster – among my colleagues just as it did in other contexts. My colleagues united against me as a mob, expressing their righteous anger and attacking me with increasingly more absurd arguments, in a way that felt reminiscent of my experiences in prison and in the streets. I provoked an affective (pre-reflective) defensive response. But why is a naked body so scary and monstruous?

I start from the *premise* that monsters (enemies/oppressors/etc.) are generally ideological constructions[200]. Rather than protecting society from 'dangers', group/societal defensive reactions against 'monsters' foreclose the possibility of understanding the other, perpetuating existing ideological barriers and the order they serve. Whenever I hear people pointing to monsters/enemies/oppressors and urging others to direct their struggle and hate against them, I worry. When a group unite against enemies and monsters, I assume we are in the presence of games of power – it's the logic of the witch-hunt. By accepting established discourses that frame others as monsters/enemies/oppressors and justify the existing order as required for protection from those others, we hinder the possibility of creating a radically different world – of the posthumanist freedom I discussed in Chapter 1.

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[200] Readers may disagree with this premise.

Therefore, I refuse to see the world as the struggle between oppressed and oppressors ('good and evil'). Power dynamics are complex and opaque, and, contrary to the standard narratives propagated by Western media and by old and new mythical stories, freedom doesn't follow liberation from monsters/enemies/oppressors. In what follows, I address the issue of the prohibition of nudity without accepting the common beliefs that it is necessary for protection from dangers, monsters, enemies, oppressors, etc. – hence that freedom from clothes is unthinkable while dangers/monsters/enemies/oppressors remain. Although different individuals have different perceptions of the 'dangers' or 'monsters' that make clothedness 'necessary' – depending on their situatedness and perspectives – I problematize the common pattern of justifying the exclusion/prohibition of the body as protection from ideologically-constructed dangers/monsters/enemies/oppressors[201].

I begin by addressing the issue of patriarchy, which often comes up in conversations about nudity. Female colleagues and friends often argue that it makes no sense to discuss our society's clothedness as something common to men and women. Women's clothedness in Western patriarchy, they say, is inseparable from the patriarchal oppression of women by men. Women must wear clothes to avoid male harassment and violence. Thus, the most urgent problem is to free women from their oppression by men: when 'liberation from oppression by men' is achieved, then (among other things) women will also be freer in their relationship to their bodies. But in the meantime, it is better for everyone to remain clothed.

In the sections below, I deviate from this perspective. I start by acknowledging the experience of women in relation to their bodies, the harassment they face from men, and the traumatic memories that have led to women's conforming to social norms. However, few feminist women I have spoken to have ever shown interest in (or even noticed) the fact that men are *also* deeply ashamed of their bodies – often more so than women. My goal in the first part of this chapter is to move away from simply blaming women's modesty on men. Instead, I consider women's discomfort and shame around nudity alongside men's, as different but interconnected aspects of the Western, clothed, patriarchal order. By blaming

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[201] Of course, my perspective could be wrong – and my rejection of a perspective focussed on power struggles between genders, races, and classes could be seen as an attempt by oppressors like me to deflect the righteous rage of the oppressed.

men, portraying them as the enemy, and conforming to the established order while waiting for 'men to change', many women who identify as feminists may in fact be *inhibiting* radical change.

2. Female nudity

Based on conversations I have had with many women over the years, it is evident that women experience a great deal of fear and discomfort when it comes their own bodies and the bodies of men. Women have been socialized to constantly be conscious of their bodies, which are constantly being looked at, judged, and compared – by men and other women. The women I know generally agree with

> 'the prevalent idea within much feminist theory that it is structurally well nigh impossible for woman to bask in the pleasures of unconsciousness—and especially not bodily unconsciousness. This belief is powerfully encapsulated in Mulvey's famous expression—woman's "to-be-looked-at-ness".' (2002: 304)

This 'to-be-looked-at-ness' is far from harmless. On the contrary, it results in a feeling that a woman's body does not truly belong to her, for she cannot safely determine what to do with it.

My wife Amy shares a similar experience. Constantly being looked at and judged by the male gaze (whether by men or by other women who adhere to patriarchal norms) means that a woman is either seen as 'attractive' and therefore subjected to unwanted attention and objectification – or seen as 'unattractive' and negatively judged for it. 'Ugly' women may be left alone (sexually), but they are likely to endure bullying and suffer from low self-esteem issues. In such a lose-lose situation, hiding one's body becomes a logical strategy to minimize pain.

Nudity, by drawing attention to one's body, exacerbates the problem: the constant sexual attention generated imposed on a woman's body robs her of the freedom to be 'simply naked'

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– even in spaces where that freedom should be present. A few years ago, I attended the annual London Naked Bike Ride with a female friend, Yetunde[202]. The London ride is part of the World Naked Bike Ride events, where thousands ride their bikes nude through town to promote body freedom[203]. Yetunde started the ride clothed, but gradually removed her clothes. As she was riding naked around London, she reported an exhilarating feeling of freedom.

However, it didn't take long before she found herself surrounded by male riders attempting to strike up conversations with her. She also felt the attention of bystanders photographing her. Amy positioned herself next to Yetunde to help her feel safe, but male riders continued to encroach upon her personal space. Feeling increasingly uncomfortable due to the unwanted attention, Yetunde put her clothes back on. Once she was dressed, the male riders lost interest and moved on. But as soon as Yetunde took her clothes off again, the male riders returned. These types of situations are unfortunately common for women. Yetunde wishes she could be naked whenever she wants, but the attitudes of men prevent her from feeling safe enough to be naked in public, even in places that are meant to be safe. She cannot escape the sexualization of her naked body in the eyes of men, which leads to a sense that her body is not her own to do with as she pleases.

Perhaps, things are slightly better for women whose bodies are less conventionally attractive. At the London Naked Bike Ride 2022 I spoke with another woman, Chiara[204], who mentioned that men had not been a problem for her during her ride. Chiara is less conventionally attractive than Yetunde, which may grant her some freedom to be naked without her nudity being sexualized. However, this comes with its own set of challenges: in a patriarchal society that places value on women based on their 'attractiveness', an 'ugly' woman is a less valuable one.

The attention, sexualization, and judgments that accompany and define a woman's relationship with her body create layers of complexity. Sociologist Ruth Barcan writes on the

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[202] Names changed for anonymity.
[203] And to call the attention on how unsafe our cities are for cyclists, too.
[204] Names changed for anonymity.

intersection between naturism and feminism. She acknowledges that, in general, female nudity attracts positive attention (even for women who are less conventionally attractive). Whereas a man who exposes his naked body is often perceived as a pervert and a criminal, female exposure is largely normalized, as it is not much different from what we regularly see on television or in the media:

> 'In a culture in which the nakedness of women is not only permitted, but covertly encouraged and systematically commodified, the idea that there might be circumstances in which female exposure is 'perverse' or deviant is uncertain' (2001: 2)

The usual reaction to female nudity is one of approval and positive attention, especially from males. However, Barcan notes, 'the public approval of female nudity is a mixed blessing', because women who expose their bodies must contend with the meanings that observers assign to their nudity, regardless of their intent:

> 'When women choose to expose their body in protest or in joy, their resistive or celebratory intent must inevitable be in some dialogue, wanted or unwanted, with the "automatic" association of female nudity and a particular, circumscribed, understanding of the erotic' (ibid.: 3).

In many cases, the eroticization of the female body in patriarchal cultures allows women to use nudity to bring visibility to protests, which is why nudity is central to several female-led activist campaigns (Femen, Peta). Yet, in a patriarchal context, nudity may often be perceived as a publicity stunt, which capitalizes on the eroticization of the female naked body in the male gaze. Much of the criticism comes from other women, often in the form of slut-shaming.

Economist Victoria Bateman from Cambridge University – known as the 'naked feminist' – has been protesting against what she calls the 'cult of female modesty'. In her recent work *Naked Feminism* (2023)*,* she recounts her attempts at challenging and questioning the

prohibition of nudity in British society and academia by showing up naked at various events. She shares some of the abusive comments she has received, including:

> 'There's nothing more anti-feminist than having to strip naked desperate for a man's attention',

> 'Being trashy is never classy and you certainly are quite trashy',

> 'You're a disgrace to all women',

> 'Thanks for sullying the sanctity of women whose bodies are private to them and their significant other' (Bateman, 2023: 2)

Bateman observes that slut-shaming comes from all sides of the political spectrum, as well. She quotes actress Emily Ratajkowski, who tells of comments she received while protesting the U.S. Supreme Court nomination of Brett Kavanaugh. Although Ratajkowski was not naked, she notes that many fellow lefty protesters made comments about the fact that she was not wearing a bra under her top:

> 'In their minds, the fact that my body was at all visible discredited me and my political action' (in Bateman, 2023: 9)

Slut-shaming is linked to ideas of respectability and decorum, but also to a widespread sense that women are in danger if they do not dress modestly. Ratajkowski also recalls being told this from young age:

> 'men and women had told me that if I dressed a certain way I wouldn't be taken seriously and could even be put in danger' (ibid.)

This association of nudity with *danger* and its indelible marking in the female flesh is perhaps crucial to appreciate the force of the prohibition of nudity.

3. Female nudity and danger

The obstacles to women experiencing 'bodily unselfconsciousness'[205] are compounded by the fact that many women's bodies have been sexually abused. This makes it difficult to separate the feeling of being *seen* as an erotic object from the traumatic memory of being *abused*. Women's own naked bodies thus become a bundle of fears, and the naked bodies of men become sites of projected violence and abuse (more or less justified).

I had extensive conversations with Amy about this issue. She tells me that for most women, the experience of nudity is inseparable from memories of violence and trauma. Being naked in mixed-gender settings makes women feel unsafe, as it often triggers memories of traumatic and violent experiences that most women have had, especially in their formative years. As Amy explains,

> 'people in female bodies have had their bodies sexualized from young age, usually by people with more power, both in private and in public.'

While I have not personally experienced the world in a female body, I understand that most individuals in female bodies have, in some way or another, experienced sexual violence from men. It's not difficult for me to believe it, as I have suffered a great deal of violence from men as well. In gay spaces where men showed sexual interest in me, I often endured unwanted touching and pushy behaviour that made me feel unsafe. Thus, for women, both the exposure of their own nakedness and the nakedness of men become associated with memories of violence and the shame attached to these memories. Amy says,

> 'You are told that you have to remain pure, but your purity is taken away from you violently and you are shamed for it, you are made to feel responsible for it, and you are not allowed to talk about it. And so, you have experienced penises as weapons and the exposure of your own body as dangerous.'

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[205] As Barcan calls it (2001).

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It is important to acknowledge that individuals react differently to experiences of unwanted sexualization of their bodies. For example, some may choose to hide their bodies in order to feel safe, while others may use their bodies as a means of empowerment. However, Amy emphasizes that *in all cases* there are lingering traumatic memories stored within these bodies that continue to operate beneath the surface of consciousness and manifest in various emotional responses.

Thus, the historical and political problem of the prohibition of nudity in the West becomes, concretely and immediately, the problem of traumatic memories stored in people's bodies, and their feelings of unsafety. These traumatic memories support society's widespread belief that nudity is dangerous. Women who defy the societal prohibition and expose parts of their bodies become targets of unwanted male attention and even sexual violence. Whilst from a social theorist's abstract perspective, this may seem like a way for society to enforce its prohibition of public nudity, in our lived experiences, the affective and post-traumatic nature of people's relationship to nudity requires sensitivity and understanding.

Amy also notes that women find it *particularly* upsetting when the prohibition of nudity is critiqued by *men* – since it is men whom they associate with memories of unsafety and sexual violence. She observes that for women, especially those from marginalised groups, it is easier to explore social nudity in the company of other women, who may have had similar traumatic experiences with men and by whom they probably feel less threatened. On the other hand, being a man myself, many women are likely to perceive my maleness as threatening, due to the experiences they have had with other men. Although I may be different from other men, there is little I can do about the fears and feelings that strangers project upon my male body.

Amy's comments make it clear that the discussion needs to shift away from abstract theory and focus on the emotional imprints within our bodies that lead to compliance with societal norms. In the next section, I delve a bit deeper into this.

4. Mnemo-techniques of power and morality of custom

In *On the Genealogy of Morality*, Nietzsche discusses the processes that produce our obedience to customary moral norms in ways similar to how Amy describes the origins of the shame and fear of nudity experienced by herself and other women like her. People's consistent obedience to norms is, for Nietzsche, socially and politically engineered. Man has been *bred* as a uniform, 'moral' animal. The work of the 'morality of custom' is

> 'the task of *making* man to a certain degree necessary, uniform, like among like, regular, and accordingly predictable' (GM II, 2).

Nietzsche believes the making of people into uniform and regular is achieved by imprinting in their flesh painful memories, which leave indelible scars and fears that never go away:

> 'How does one make a memory for the human animal? How does one impress something onto this partly dull, partly scattered momentary understanding, this forgetfulness in the flesh, so that it remains present?... One burns something in so that it remains in one's memory: only what does not cease to *give pain* remains in one's memory' (GM II, 3).

Nietzsche calls this the '*mnemo-technique'* of power. To produce ongoing obedience and conformity, memories have to *remain* painful. Religious beliefs and norms rely, Nietzsche says, on this mnemo-technique that marks people's flesh with indelible memories of pain:

> 'a few ideas are to be made indelible, omnipresent, unforgettable, "fixed", for the sake of hypnotizing the entire nervous and intellectual system with these "fixed ideas".' (ibid.)

Contemporary psychology of trauma[206] supports this notion. In his book *The Body Keeps the Score*, psychologist Bessel Van Der Kolk explains how painful memories remain stored in

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[206] 'Trauma', in Greek, means 'wound'.

the body. Traumatic experiences permanently alter one's perception of risk and safety; they modify neurological processes and mind/body connections (2015: 93). Traumatic memories (still-painful memories of old wounds) re-wire our neurological mechanisms, thus re-making us into who we are. The way we perceive the world and its 'dangers' is largely the product of the painful experiences we have had. Agreeing with Nietzsche, Van Der Kolk says their effect on our nervous and intellectual system is permanent (2015: 205ff.). Nietzsche notes that people who have been marked with similar painful experiences are afraid of the same things, and therefore think alike. The alleged 'universality' of reason is the result of this collective imprinting: 'with the help of this kind of memory one finally came "to reason"!' (GM II, 3)[207].

Based on my conversations with Amy and many other women, I believe the fear of the naked body may largely stem from a process of socialization through trauma, similar to what Nietzsche discusses. Women's bodies have been marked by pain, making them compliant. Past traumas make it affectively challenging to transgress and disobey. While women's painful relationships with their bodies are more discussed than men's – men's relationships to their bodies are also filled with deep-rooted shame and fears. I view this shame and fear as the result of socially-engineered traumatization, affecting both men and women (arguably, men's body-shame is rarely discussed simply because most men are too ashamed to admit they feel shame).

In the following section, I align myself with Black feminist theorist bell hooks, who argues that to truly understand and change the existing (patriarchal) order, we must stop viewing women as oppressed victims and men as their oppressors. Instead, we should recognize how the current system of power is built upon the traumatization of *both* girls and boys[208]. Hence, men and women must work *together* to bring about change. They must seek to understand each other's perspectives, rather than placing blame for their oppression on one another. Reciprocal blaming and fear only perpetuate the existing order.

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[207] The process of marking pain in the members of a community for uniform development is never perfect. Some individuals may develop ways of thinking that stray from their community's standards. The 'heroes' of dystopian sci-fi novels (*Brave New World*, *1984*, *Fahrenheit 451*, etc.) are often 'failures' in the production process of conformist citizens. However, escaping to freedom in the real world is more difficult.
[208] Notwithstanding many important differences in how they are traumatized.

5. Understanding patriarchy beyond 'feminist' power games

Society's norms are imprinted in young boys as they are in girls, to ensure the reproduction of the social order. There are clear differences in how boys and girls are socialized; in the Western patriarchal order, men are associated with the mind while women are valued for their bodies. Among other things, this leads to men disconnecting from their bodies and emotions[209]. Men's social power, like that of the Christian God on which it is modelled, is based on a claim to disembodiment[210]. But the construction of gender norms for both men and women are systematically interrelated – they are two sides of a same coin. They can only be understood – and challenged – *together*.

Black feminist theorist bell hooks is a leading proponent of the of the strand of feminism that rejects constructions of women as 'oppressed' and men as their 'oppressors'. Instead of approaching feminism as a power struggle (as 'liberation' from oppressors/enemies/monsters), she thinks true freedom requires recognizing constructions of others as oppressors/enemies/monsters as operations of power. Such operations of power prevent us from encountering and understanding the other, and therefore preclude any possibility to explore radically *new* ways of being together. Thus, constructions of others as oppressors/enemies/monsters are, in fact, profoundly conservative of the established order.

In *The Will to Change*, bell hooks argues that a certain 'radical feminist' understanding of patriarchy as 'oppression of women by men' and the labelling of men as oppressors has justified women's ongoing ignorance about the reality of men. In turn, this ongoing ignorance has prevented a genuine understanding of the social and power dynamics:

> 'the radical feminist labelling of all men as oppressors and all women as victims was a way to deflect attention away from the reality of men and our ignorance about them. To simply label them as oppressors and dismiss them meant we never had to give

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[209] For feelings reside in the body, supposedly, and hinder the functioning of the mind.
[210] See Chapter 3 above.

voice to the gaps in our understanding or to talk about maleness in complex ways. We did not have to talk about the ways our fear of men distorted our perspectives and blocked our understanding. Hating men was just another way to not take men and masculinity seriously' (2005: xiv)

For bell hooks, feminists' apparent struggle against their 'oppression by men' hides a power game in which 'feminists', rather than challenging patriarchy, in fact seek equal access to men's position *within* patriarchy[211]. In this way, they often *reinforce* the metaphysical and cultural beliefs on which Western patriarchal power rests. They *endorse* patriarchy. Instead, bell hooks urges her readers to see the struggle against patriarchy not as the struggle of women against men but as the struggle against a set of *broadly shared* cultural beliefs and norms underpinning the existing system of power. This set of cultural beliefs is normally accepted by women just like it is by men[212]:

> 'We need to highlight the role women play in perpetuating and sustaining patriarchal culture so that we will recognize patriarchy as a system women and men support equally, even if men receive more rewards from that system. Dismantling and changing patriarchal culture is a work that men and women must do together' (2005: 24)

I believe the prohibition of nudity in Western patriarchy to be endorsed and reproduced by the ideological beliefs of *both* men and women. These ideological beliefs make it seems as if the established ways of relating to our naked bodies is the only possible one, *given the current circumstances*. By portraying some Other as the enemy/oppressor/monster, men and women alike can remain attached to their ideological beliefs and therefore avoid exploring their shame, their fears, and the real reasons for their affective reactions to nudity. They can conform to the established order and indefinitely postpone meaningful change while waiting for the 'threat' posed by the Other to magically vanish.

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[211] Feminists seeking a share of men's power also sought to separate themselves from their bodies to claim men's disembodied status: 'By claiming that they wanted the power men had, man-hating feminists covertly proclaimed that they too wanted to be rewarded for being out of touch with their feelings' (2005: 1)

[212] To see men as 'the enemy' is something which, arguably, women in patriarchal societies have always done: it serves the perpetuation of the system.

6. Patriarchal men and the trauma of their forced disembodiment

To challenge patriarchy, it is important to first understand what we are challenging. Drawing on psychotherapist John Bradshaw, bell hooks defines patriarchy as a system of power based on

> 'blind obedience – the foundation upon which patriarchy stands; the repression of all emotions except fear; the destruction of individual willpower; and the repression of thinking whenever it departs from the authority figure's way of thinking' (2005: 23)

Patriarchy is a system of dominance rooted in violence. However, bell hooks refuses to view men as the sole oppressors, nor does she think men are *inherently* violent – men's dominant status within patriarchy is maintained by *socializing* boys to be violent (2005: 51-55). In fact, the increasing empowerment of women shows that they can be as violent as men are. Thus, bell hooks is highly critical of the

> 'psychology of patriarchy, which insists that there is a biological connection between having a penis and the will to do violence. This thinking continues to shape notions of manhood in our society despite the fact that… [a]s women have gained the right to be patriarchal men in drag, women are engaging in acts of violence similar to those of their male counterparties. The will to use violence is really not linked to biology but to a set of cultural expectations about the nature of power in a dominator culture' (2005: 55)[213]

If the will to do violence is not linked to having a penis, it is crucial to understand how it is engineered. bell hooks quotes psychologist Terrence Real, according to whom

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[213] This point is controversial. In *Demonic Males* (1997), Richard Wrangham and Dale Peterson argue that there is a biological link between having a penis and a propensity for violence.

[t]he way we "turn boys into men" is through injury: we sever them from their mothers, research tells us, far too early. We pull them away from their own expressiveness, from their feelings, from sensitivity to others… Disconnection is not fallout from traditional masculinity. Disconnection *is* masculinity' (2005: 60)

The will to do violence is produced by separating men from their feelings, from their bodies, and from their sexuality. This separation of men from their bodies and sexuality is thus the very foundation of patriarchy. To challenge patriarchy, bell hooks argues that men must reconnect with their bodies and sexuality. They must 'be able to be sexual beings':

'If masses of men could recover this fundamental passion for their own bodies, that shift away from patriarchal sex might lead us toward a true sexual revolution. To recover the power and passion of male sexuality unsullied by patriarchal assault, males of all ages must be allowed to speak openly of their sexual longing. They must be able to be sexual beings in a space where patriarchal thinking can no longer make violation the only means of attaining sexual pleasure' (2005: 90)

Men's separation from their bodies and sexuality functions like an armour. It makes them feel invulnerable and supports their power. Much of the work done in men's groups aims to help them be vulnerable, in touch with their bodies, feelings, and sensuality. However, this work is complicated by the shame many men feel towards these aspects of themselves that society has rejected:

'Since shaming is often used to socialize boys away from their feeling selves toward the patriarchal male mask, many grown men have an internal shaming voice' (2005: 146)

The task of challenging patriarchy requires men to let go of their shame, to be vulnerable, be vulnerable, and reconnect with their bodies and sexuality. It is about reclaiming integrity:

'Wounded males must recover all the parts of the self they abandoned in serving the needs of patriarchal maleness' (2005: 155),

Unfortunately, men often feel ashamed to admit their shame. They would rather ignore or deny their wounds than face the powerful emotions that could arise. Suggesting to men that they have been wounded and feel shame often leads to dismissive or defensive reactions. Furthermore, the feminist rhetoric that portrays men as the enemy deprives them of safe spaces where men and boys could experiment with different ways of being in the world:

> '[t]he feminist rhetoric that insisted on identifying males as the enemy often closed down the space where boys could be deemed as worthy of rescue from patriarchal exploitation and oppression as were their female counterparts' (2005: 39).

According to bell hooks, our separation from our (male) bodies and from our sensual pleasures is the original wound that *produces* patriarchal violence[214]. However, healing this wound and reconnecting with our bodies is challenging in a social world that constructs them as 'dangerous monsters'. Thus, societal fears of male bodies and sexuality reproduce the separation of men from their bodies, and all the related problems.

7. My experience in a male body: different traumas, similar outcomes

The account of how boys are raised in America as described by bell hooks in *The Will to Change* resonates with my own experience of growing up as a young man in Italy. I was taught to be ashamed of my body and to hide it. Connecting with and discussing my feelings was never encouraged. I was made to feel ashamed of my penis, and exploring sensual pleasures was discouraged; masturbation was never really about pleasure. The constant threat of bullying from other boys painfully taught me I needed to build an armour, to become invulnerable. I felt the pressure to conform to the norms of patriarchal masculinity. I embraced the (safer) ideal of a disembodied self. I denied and tried to forget about my physical self.

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[214] It does not protect women from male patriarchal violence, as many women say, nor is it a figment of imagination created by 'crazy women', as some men argue.

Barcan says it is hard for women to be unselfconscious about their bodies, because of their inescapable 'to-be-looked-at-ness'. As someone who grew up in a male body, my experience was different, I was raised to believe that my male body was not to be exposed and that nobody would want to see it. This did not mean that I was free from body consciousness; on the contrary, I felt compelled to always cover my body with boring, concealing, 'manly' clothing. Revealing any part of my body through my clothes would have subjected me to ridicule from both boys and girls. Even the concept of 'sexiness', as a man, required a disembodied approach – the male sex symbols portrayed by the media wore collared shirts, long trousers, and smart suits[215]. Even in the summer heat, I was raised to believe I should not wear sandals unless I am at the beach. I believed that my *male* body was inherently unattractive and undesirable. I complied, diligently keeping my body hidden away, and filled with shame.

As an adult, I have been trying to reconnect with my body, but it has not been easy: outside queer spaces, male bodies are generally unwelcome. I have often heard heterosexual men say that male bodies are unappealing and that no one wants to see them. In public, my nudity signals to many I am a pervert or potential rapist; upon seeing my body, people have violent reactions – they often call the police. Even in supposedly progressive spaces, men are encouraged to embrace their feelings and their vulnerability only as long as their flesh remains concealed. Among my radical feminist colleagues, too, my nudity has made me into a public enemy.

I told my own experience of growing up ashamed in a male body not because I believe it is universal (of course it isn't) but to highlight that the different processes of socialization that different individuals undergo to fit in our clothed, anti-body social order[216] produce an essentially similar result. Despite our different circumstances, we are all subject to a societal prohibition and shaming of our flesh; in the modern Western world, the prohibition of public nudity applies universally to all. My traumatic socialization into body-shame is different from that which other males, females, and individuals from other societies or cultures have

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[215] It was not until my late 30s that I discovered I could feel sexy wearing shorts, or tops that exposed my shoulders or my belly – without this implying I was 'a faggot'.
[216] Depending on their gender, race, class, social and individual context, etc.

undergone, yet somehow, we are all ashamed and afraid of bodies. Our bodies are all prohibited, excluded from public spaces. Focussing on the particular experiences that produced our trauma and compliance – and blaming other social groups for them: women blaming men, etc. – stops us from seeing the bigger picture. We blame each other and construct imaginary monsters/enemies/oppressors instead of recognizing that we are all subjected to the same prohibition and that by blaming others, we reproduce the existing order.

For this reason, I don't want to focus on intersectional analysis and on discussing the differences in how different bodies are prohibited. Ultimately, all our bodies are equally prohibited, regardless of one's gender, race, class, etc. Intersectional analysis is very relevant to certain discussions (especially when one's position in society determines their (un)freedom and its extent), but its focus on differential oppression across social groups can easily lead to attempts to separate allies from enemies, 'same' from 'different', and 'more oppressed' from 'less oppressed'. When searching for allies 'like us' to wage the struggle against more or less imaginary enemies ('oppressors'), we implicitly reinforce the belief in enemies/oppressors/monsters. Furthermore, the more we realize that we exist in a multitude of power relationships and that our particular position and experience is unique – the more isolated we find ourselves to be. Instead, I seek to focus on the fact that our different experiences of having our flesh shamed and prohibited *all* contribute together to create a social space that reproduces the shaming and prohibition of our flesh – of men and women alike, whites and blacks, young and old, rich and poor.

This is the crucial point: despite all our different experiences and perspectives, we all grew up separated from our flesh. *Everyone*, regardless of their gender, race, age, class, etc, feels (some) shame or fear/discomfort around nudity and flesh. Any appearance of the flesh outside of the designated ('sacred') spaces and without the appropriate precautions (see Chapter 2) makes people afraid. People unite against the transgressor, who is endangering their otherwise safe and orderly world. Among colleagues, in (supposedly) radical, feminist spaces, my naked body attracts charges of 'privileged white cis-maleness', 'colonial attitudes', etc. Among strangers, whose perception of my nudity is inevitably framed by current discourse, I get caught up in the current moral panic about 'indecent exposure':

people see me as a 'pervert' or rapist who is endangering their communities – and react accordingly.

In what follows, I focus on these attitudes of fear, discomfort, and danger that people experience around nudity. I see these attitudes as largely religious fears, which protect our world's *taboos* – but their religious character doesn't make them any less real. On the contrary, arguably, their religious ('irrational') character makes them immune to reasoned criticisms, and thus even more powerful. We have no defences against them.

8. Taboos, fear, danger, discomfort

I shift my focus to the fear and danger that people feel around nudity and flesh – mine and that of others. Within any society, notions of danger are discursively constructed according to that society's system of beliefs (religion/ideology). As discussed in Chapter 2, 'danger' is perceived in relation to breaches of religious prohibitions. Durkheim and Douglas, in their analyses of religions, stress that *taboos* are protected by feelings of danger:

> 'the ideal order of society is guarded by dangers which threaten transgressors. These danger-beliefs are as much threats which one man uses to coerce another as dangers which he himself fears to incur by his own lapses from righteousness… Thus we find that certain moral values are upheld and certain social rules defined by beliefs in dangerous contagion' (Douglas, 1996: 3)

Social theorists may see these dangers as symbolic, but members of a society experience them as *real* dangers. In their minds, there is no qualitative difference between the 'dangers' that accompany breaches of taboos and 'real' dangers[217]. This understanding of danger as psychosocially, discursively constructed is uncontroversial in academic literature. Sociologist Ruth Simpson, for example, observes that

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[217] The notion that some dangers are 'real' (death?) may require further discussion.

‘perceptions of safety and danger are "intersubjective" – products of social construction, collective agreement, and socialization’ (1996: 550).

The religious and affective nature of perceptions of danger entails that there is no ‘rational’ argument against them. I cannot change the perceptions of people who have been collectively socialized (traumatized) to perceive nudity as dangerous.

Often, nudity is met not with fear (as ‘danger’) but with ‘discomfort’ – yet fear and discomfort are essentially the same affect. For example, I often remain clothed to avoid a feeling of discomfort, or to protect others from feeling uncomfortable around my naked body. In this sense, ‘discomfort’ is the feeling that something ‘may’ be dangerous – it is a form of fear. It is the feeling of being outside of one’s comfort zone: which is fear. Discomfort is often fear of the unknown – of not being able to handle what may come our way (and isn’t this what *all* fears are about? – as Susan Jeffers argues in *Feel the Fear and Do It Anyway*; 2012: 14).

Without delving deeply into the clinical and psychological literature on pain and affects, I highlight a fundamental qualitative similarity between what people report as ‘discomfort’ and a certain type of *feeling* of danger, or ‘fear’. Regardless of the nature and extent of the threat we perceive, feelings of danger (fear) and discomfort are often experienced as the same. In his article *Knowing the Difference between Discomfort and Danger*, psychologist Jerry Givens says,

‘the stress response in our nervous system [for danger and for discomfort] may initially be seen or experienced as the same’[218]

We struggle to separate the feelings, and confusion ensues. Thus, discomfort is experienced by our nervous system as a feeling of actual danger. The immediate reaction will be exactly the same: fight, flight, or freeze. We usually take our somatic stress reactions at face value

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[218] https://www.elephantjournal.com/2015/07/discomfort-vs-danger-knowing-the-difference/

and accept them as evidence that we are in danger. Rationalizations are later constructed to justify our immediate affective response[219].

As a social theorist, I recommend adopting a skeptical attitude towards feelings of danger, fear, and discomfort that people report in the presence of *taboos* – such as nudity and the flesh. Although *taboos* do have a power that can be abused to cause harm, feelings of danger and discomfort around *taboos* often indicate a society policing its religious limits. In the next few sections, I explore people's fears around 'indecent exposure', 'flashers', and male nudity. I suggest that such fears are ideological constructions[220].

9. Indecent exposure, flashers, violence

Those who assaulted me for being publicly naked experienced me as a pervert endangering their communities. My colleagues and friends (who don't see me as a pervert) accused me of not realizing that most women have been traumatized by male perverts. Many said they had been 'flashed' by perverts who exposed their genitals. Such experiences have produced the feelings of fear and danger most women attach to male nakedness (to penises, specifically). According to most people I speak to[221], the danger posed by flashers and perverts to women and children – men are immune, apparently – justifies our societies' prohibition of nudity.

In what follows, I suggest that such fears are largely ideological constructions that serve to enforce and reproduce the religious prohibition of the flesh. Perverts and flashers are imaginary enemies – monsters whom we are taught to fear. The real problem is not 'perverts', or 'flashers', or any other 'monsters': it is the fear itself, and the order it protects. The fear of imaginary and ideological dangers produces the obedient compliance of the fearful masses.

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[219] Psychotherapists, mindfulness coaches, yoga teachers, and Buddhist practitioners encourage us to be self-critical of our feelings of 'discomfort' and to question our nervous system's stress responses. In practice, this is easier said than done.

[220] I am aware that this will lead to further accusations that I am a 'privileged white cis-male who does not understand the dangers of living in a female body'.

[221] Across classes, races, genders, etc.

The fear of 'flashers' underpins the legal prohibition of public nudity in England. This is technically only a prohibition of 'flashing': by criminalizing the exposure of one's genitals *insofar as one's intent is to cause alarm and distress to a victim*[222], the law addresses the stereotypical (male) flashers hiding in the bushes, naked under a mac, suddenly exposing their genitals to his victims to scare her. Significantly, 'indecent exposure' almost-exclusively criminalizes men flashing women – not women flashing men, not women flashing women, not men flashing men[223]. This stereotypical representation has little to do with reality – as I explain below, flashers are mostly female, and, whichever their gender, they rarely intend to cause alarm and distress.

However, public and prosecutors' lack of interest in understanding the complex psycho-social motivations of 'flashers' means that, in practice, the UK law against 'flashing' criminalizes male nudity because many (including jurors, judges, and police officers) believe male nudity to be *inherently* 'indecent': aimed at causing distress. When passersby or police officers confront me for being naked in public, they immediately assume that I am a 'flasher', a 'pervert', someone seeking to harm others. The legal distinction between (non-violent) public nudity and (violent) 'flashing' is invisible/irrelevant/unintelligible to most.

The common equation of (male) nudity with violence and predatory behaviour is largely a discursive and ideological construction; most people (women *and* men) who expose their bodies in public do not intend to scare others. Although men may occasionally 'flash' their penises to scare victims, individuals are much more likely to be predators and violent when they are in positions of power. It is *power* that causes people to be violent/abusive over others – and usually, predatory, abusive, or violent behaviour doesn't involve nudity. Nor is this specific to men: bell hooks notes that, when women have power, they can be as violent as men (2005: 63). Nudity has nothing to do with the will to do violence – individuals wearing suits or wigs harm others *much more* than those who are naked. Its *taboo* character gives nudity a symbolic power that individuals seeking to feel power over others may abuse[224]. Thus, male flashers sometimes exploit the symbolic power of nudity to overpower others –

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[222] Sexual Offences Act 2003, section 66.
[223] Because only male genitals are distressing? Because only women find genitals distressing?
[224] Notwithstanding obvious differences, there may be similarities with how females also exploit nudity when seeking power over males – individuals seeking power over others rely on whatever tools they have available.

the case of Maurice (below) is a good example. However, not only is it nonsensical to equate nudity with the will to do violence, but also, if I am correct, the prohibition of nudity is the *cause* of the acts of violence it purports to protect people from.

In her book, *The Dark Side of the Mind*, criminal psychologist Kerry Daynes recounts an interaction she had with Maurice, a patient/prisoner under her care. Maurice was a 'flasher':

> 'he liked to lurk in isolated spots and whip out what should have been his private parts at unsuspecting girls and women,' (2020: 2).

Psychiatrists had diagnosed him with 'sexual sadism disorder': he derived sexual pleasure from causing pain, humiliation, or distress to others:

> 'The shock and horror on [his victim's] faces was a source of exquisite personal and sexual pleasure for him' (Ibid: 3).

Visiting him in the prison/hospital where he was held, Daynes recounts how, one day, while she was having soup for lunch, Maurice quietly approached her from behind and

> 'in the blink, quite literally, of an eye, popped his ocular prosthesis straight out of his face and into my Heinz Cream of Tomato. Before I could process what was happening, I was covered in blood-red spatters and my soup was gazing back at me.' (ibid.)

She then describes her reaction:

> 'I momentarily lost self-control and gave Maurice exactly the reaction he was hoping for. I shrieked, physically leapt out of my seat, my Celtic complexion turning an even whiter shade of pale' (ibid.)

As a criminal psychologist, Daynes understands that for people like Maurice what matters is to provoke 'fear and disgust on the face of the nearest woman' (ibid.: 4). They enjoy

unexpectedly exposing their penises to unsuspecting women because, in our society, this is likely to elicit a mix of fear and disgust. If exposing their penises is not an option (such as, in a secure hospital unit), they resort to other tactics to achieve the same response. For individuals like Maurice, the penis itself is not the focus; it is the power and reaction it elicits in our society and culture. If nudity and penises weren't stigmatized, individuals like Maurice would find other ways to shock their victims.

The UK law against 'indecent exposure' is specifically designed to criminalize people like Maurice. However, it does not criminalize acts intending to cause alarm and distress to others that do not involve exposing one's genitals – for example, popping a glass eye into someone's soup bowl is not a crime[225]. Albeit ostensibly aimed at predatory/abusive/violent conducts, 'indecent exposure' – as implied by the name – remains, fundamentally, a crime of immorality, in which religious transgression and violent intent become indistinguishable. And, as I discuss below, not all flashers are like Maurice; not every man who unsolicitedly exposes his penis does it with the intention of causing distress.

10. Against ideological constructions of 'flashers'

The website dickflash.com is a public online forum for flashers and exhibitionists. Participants all enjoy exposing their genitals to others, often non-consensually (perhaps because consent is often difficult to ask). However, they all seem to seek, or hope for, *positive* and *supportive* reactions. They do not jump out of bushes or wear trench coats; their exposures are usually made to appear 'accidental' and non-threatening. Posters' intent is not violent, although their actions are likely to make others uncomfortable (in our societies, suddenly seeing a naked man can easily feel threatening).

I cannot help but wonder how much of this discomfort is due to people's interpretations and established ideological constructions. Frequently, the motives of flashers appear to be the thrill of the experience and/or a desire to connect with others. While often seemingly unaware

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[225] If intentionally causing alarm and distress were a crime, many individuals in positions of power would be in prison.

of the context, and therefore of the reactions they may elicit, flashers posting on dickflash.com do not appear to seek – or take pleasure from – distressed reactions. The issue of 'flashers' seems more complex than the standard narrative of male perverts stepping out of the bushes to scare unsuspecting girls. It is perhaps more reminiscent of fairy-tale 'monsters' whom everyone fears (and thus avoids) but who, in fact, are desperately seeking connection.

Academic and clinical research on 'flashers' refutes the mainstream narrative too. In 'Incidence and Nature of Male Genital Exposure Behavior as Reported by College Women', psychiatrist and neurobehavioral scientist Daniel Cox studies a large sample of flashing incidents and concludes that

> 'the standard conception of the exhibitionist, [which] involves a stranger stepping out and unexpectedly exposing his genitals to a female… must be reconsidered' (1988: 233).

Along the same lines, and with the added benefit of more recent research, clinical psychologist Tiffany Hopkins et al. (2016) also reject the standard narrative. First, they note the research community's agreement that 'for exhibitionists, the central purpose… is to secure the attention of others' (2016: 5). They suggest exhibitionism should not be considered a 'sexual' pathology at all. Echoing Daynes' view, Hopkins and her colleagues believe that the choice of the 'sexual' means is only dictated by the power that their taboo nature confers to our 'sexual' organs. Exposing a penis, a female breast, or a vulva, is an effective way of securing others' attention – which is what exhibitionists *really* seek[226].

Furthermore, Hopkins and her colleagues reject the standard narrative according to which exhibitionists are predominantly male:

> 'The gender disparity suggested by the literature (i.e., exhibitionism and voyeurism being predominantly male disorders) was not substantiated' (2016: 27).

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[226] Exhibitionism is a strategy to seek recognition. The pathologizing and criminalization of displaying specific body parts enforces a religious order.

In fact, quoting therapist Patrick Carnes[227], they say that

> 'women in treatment for sexual addiction typically report higher levels of exhibitionistic behavior than men do, as they receive less legal ramifications and are often rewarded with sexual attention' (2016: 10).

Female flashing is not seen as violent, unlike male flashers who are often arrested and convicted for 'indecent exposure'. Female flashers are more likely to receive a friendly smile instead of punishment. Even when women are criminally charged for acts that would result in a man being imprisoned and placed on the sex offender registry for life, they are usually let off easily. For example, in August 2022, Beverley Dean was fined 200 pounds for openly masturbating in broad daylight on a bench outside a supermarket[228]. In December 2022, Ju Singh received a community order for repeatedly exposing her naked body and making lewd comments at a children playground[229].

Male 'flashers' are viewed as violent and dangerous perverts who cause lifelong trauma for women and children (while apparently having no effect on other men). Female flashers, on the other hand, are often invisible[230] or 'mentally unwell'. This stark difference raises important questions – not only on the double standards but on the nature of the threat posed by 'flashers'.

11. The 'indecent exposure epidemic': a case of moral panic?

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[227] See *Out of the Shadows (2018)*

[228] https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-11112527/Woman-54-fined-200-performing-sex-act-outside-Waitrose-claims-suffering-stress.html

[229] https://www.whitehavennews.co.uk/news/23181034.whitehaven-womans-offences-entirely-character---court/

[230] Barcan reports an interview where a psychologist was asked about the literature on female flashing:
'Interviewer: And in those textbook cases, when a woman flashes—I assume it's baring breasts or is it also the genitals?
Psychologist: I've only ever read of one in—whose book is it? I forget now—that's actually exposing their genitals. But these days it would be terribly difficult to discern who was exposing their breasts for pathological reasons as against acceptable behaviour.' (2002: 14).

In his work *Policing the Crisis*, cultural theorist Stuart Hall defines moral panics as 'ideological constructions of "reality"' (1978: 29) where the public's reaction is not in response to an actual threat (which is usually minimal or non-existent), but to a perceived or symbolic threat shaped by control agencies and by the media:

> 'When such discrepancies appear between threat and reaction, between what is perceived and what that is a perception of, we have good evidence to suggest we are in the presence of an ideological displacement. We call this displacement a *moral panic*'. (ibid.)

Hall illustrates this phenomenon through the example of the 'mugging epidemic' in Britain in the 1970s. The construction of this moral panic involved a collaborative effort between the police and the press, drawing on existing racist stereotypes reinforced by media coverage. This led to increased funding and stricter laws for the police; politicians played along, and citizens united against a perceived threat to social order.

Moral panics happen all the time. Most recently, as journalist Sirin Kale highlights in *The Guardian* of 7 October 2021[231], we face an 'indecent exposure epidemic'. Writing in the aftermath of the highly publicized rape and murder of Sarah Everard by police officer Wayne Couzens, who had previously faced accusations of indecent exposure, Kale supports the view that (*male*) 'indecent exposure' and rape are linked. She urges the police to crack down on male flashers to protect women and children from potential rapists.

In her article, Kale tells the stories of two women who had been 'flashed' – one by a man masturbating in his car and another by a man masturbating in a park. According to Kale, these incidents are just the tip of the iceberg. She quotes Dr Fiona Vera-Gray from Durham University, who says, 'The vast majority of women, if you talk to them, will remember an experience of being flashed' (ibid.). These experiences are often frightening and traumatic. Taali Kwaten, one of the interviewees, recounts her experience. After being flashed, she

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[231] https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/oct/07/indecent-exposure-flashing-sarah-everard-police-response

'started to panic, because there were mums and kids walking towards us. I thought: this could traumatise them' (ibid.)

Kwaten's concern that local women and children might be traumatized by seeing a man masturbating in the bushes was such that it left her shaking and crying:

'I was really emotional and shaking and crying. But I felt like he was going to do it again, and I had an obligation to call.' (ibid.)

After her intervention, the man was arrested. Kale agrees with Kwaten's belief that (male) 'indecent exposure' should be policed and prosecuted severely, because male flashers traumatize women and children for life and, often, they are also rapists. Kale's interview with criminologist Jane Monckton-Smith, supports this viewpoint. Monckton-Smith states:

'Flashing is an act of sexual aggression… It might not lead directly to rape, but it may lead to things like domestic abuse, coercive control, stalking and sexual violence.'(ibid.)

According to Monckton-Smith, flashing is evidence of a man's a criminal intent:

'If we've got someone who's fantasising about offending, they are going to have to take steps to get where they are going.' (ibid.)

Let's pause here. The idea that someone who exposes their naked body is automatically someone who 'fantasizes about offending' is absurd. There is no logic behind it, and it is not supported by any clinical or academic research. Perhaps, it is important to note that Monckton-Smith is not an expert in the psychology of sexual disorders. She works with the police[232] and may have vested interests. Kale's article may have been part of a police campaign to achieve harsher laws and increased funding. Yet, in the process, this self-interested propaganda reinforces ideological fears about naked men and their monstrosity.

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[232] See https://www.glos.ac.uk/staff/profile/jane-monckton-smith/.

Expressing a different concern, Heidi Colthup, a lecturer in English who had been flashed in the past, explains why she finds flashing so distressing:

> 'You aren't doing anything. Just minding your business. And suddenly this man, completely unbidden, inserts himself into your life. It's that total removal of control. We all like to think we are in charge of our own destinies and can do what we want. But flashing shows how flimsy that freedom and choice really is. Somebody – a man – can take that away from you.' (ibid.)

Colthup is referring to an episode when, as a teenage girl, she was flashed by another teenage boy. It is evident that Colthup felt extremely distressed after unexpectedly seeing the stranger's penis. In her interview, Kale says Colthup was 'close to tears'. But why does *seeing* a boy's penis cause such distress? What causes a girl to feel that a boy who showed her his penis has 'inserted himself into her life'? to perceive this episode as a 'total removal of control', as proof that 'we are not in charge of our destinies', and that we cannot 'do what we want'? How does seeing someone's penis, even without consent, take away someone's freedom?[233]

12. Moral panic is genuine panic

I do not dismiss Colthup's feelings: I want to understand how in contemporary Britain a schoolboy showing his penis to a fellow schoolgirl provokes such extreme reactions. Echoing Colthup, Vera-Gray states that women 'have to be hyper-vigilant in public. Because there are men out there who will seek to do them harm' (ibid.) – suggesting that (male) flashing is a dangerous act that inherently harms women. I genuinely struggle to comprehend the gravity of the harm that a woman experiences from *seeing* a man's penis[234]. And why is female

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[233] To be clear, I would understand such reactions if someone had been raped or sexually assaulted. But Colthup is only talking about being flashed.

[234] Especially when this is from afar or through a car's window, which is typically the case.

flashing, which clinical psychologists describe as essentially the same as male flashing, not seen as dangerous, and completely disregarded by the media?

I embarked in these reflections with the intent of understanding the anger many feel when seeing my nude body in public. I feel that my naked body becomes the canvas on which others project their fear of the 'monster' (the sexual predator who 'fantasizes about offending') – when people see my penis, they assume I 'fantasize about offending'. When men see my penis, they assume I want to rape 'their' women and children. Once the image of the scary sexual monster (and its association with nudity) takes hold in the collective psyche, reinforced by media and left unchallenged in public discussions, I cannot escape having this monstrosity projected onto me. Nudity becomes unsafe and dangerous – *for me, for the naked individual*. Contrary to Kant's beliefs, critical reason is no match for the self-righteous violence of society. Reasoning together becomes impossible; to stay safe from the violence of those who believe they are 'protecting' their community from danger, I must conform.

Mediatic constructions of the 'monster' reinforce in the public the belief that transgressors are *actually* dangerous. In her *Guardian* article, Kale suggests that flashers often go on to become rapists, thus indicating that the danger is real. She calls for the people and the police to unite against these monsters. However, not only does Kale disregard the specialist literature[235], but she also misunderstands/misquotes her *only* source – a paper by psychologists Matthew McNally and William Fremouw (2014). Kale quotes them as saying that 5%-10% of flashers become rapists, whereas in fact McNally and Fremouw *reject* the hypothesis of a correlation and conclude that they do *not* believe flashing to be causally correlated to criminality (2014: 483). Contrary to what *The Guardian* suggests, McNally and Fremouw agree with recent academic and clinical research, which unanimously concludes that the common assumption that 'indecent exposure' is a precursor of rape is misplaced:

> 'These findings do not support a progression toward a preferential rape pattern for the vast majority of perpetrators of exhibitionistic behavior' (ibid.)

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[235] See above discussion of Hopkins, 2016.

However, how many readers of *The Guardian* fact-check their sources, especially when the claims align with 'common sense'?

On 6 March 2023, *The Guardian* told the story of a cyclist who believed that several years prior, she had seen Wayne Couzens standing naked before her as she cycled on a country lane. She says,

"The horror of what happened will remain with me for the rest of my life'[236].

The day after, 7 March 2023, *The Guardian* published an unsigned op-ed titled '*The Guardian* view on indecent exposure: a crime that must be taken seriously'[237]. In this piece, *The Guardian* repeats the false claim that in 5%-10% of cases 'indecent exposure' leads to rape (once again, misquoting McNally and Fremouw) and its calls for tougher policing. Two days later, on 9 March 2023, *The Guardian* published an interview with the mother of Libby Squire, a woman who was murdered in 2019[238]. In the interview, the mother suggests that the killer had 'exposed himself' to her daughter before killing her. She reinforces the claim that 'indecent exposure is a gateway crime' and calls for a harsher stance from the police and the law. She states:

'Not every non-contact sexual offender will go on and become a rapist, but every rapist was a non-contact sexual offender at one point. So I think we need to take them for the red flags that they really are' (ibid.).

These views are not fundamentally different from arguments used to justify the mass-criminalization of black kids, immigrants, and other xenophobic and racist policies. It is the psychology of moral panics: just as 'illegal' immigrants become criminals, 'indecent' exposers become rapists (in their rabble-rousing, *The Guardian* ignores the consensus view in psychological and psychiatric literature that 'indecent exposure' should not even be

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[236] https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2023/mar/06/wayne-couzens-sentenced-to-19-months-in-prison-for-indecent-exposure

[237] https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2023/mar/07/the-guardian-view-on-indecent-exposure-a-that-must-be-taken-seriously

[238] https://www.theguardian.com/society/2023/mar/09/take-indecent-exposure-more-seriously-urges-libby-squire-mother-hull-student

considered a 'sexual' offence). A few cases turn into a 'public emergency'. In a moral panic, distinctions blur – people would rather be safe than sorry, leading to self-righteous violence against the 'others' perceived as a threat to the community.

13. Vulnerability and the politics of fear

Amidst the flurry of media articles on the 'indecent exposure epidemic', Martha Gill wrote an article in *The Guardian* on 5 March 2023 disagreeing with the position endorsed by her editorial board[239]. Gill discusses a recent episode in which a woman was attacked in a gym, in Florida. She successfully fought off her attacker. A local sheriff praised her as 'an inspiration to other women'[240]. This sparked online fury because it was seen as sending 'the wrong sort of message': for instead, 'the real and only message was that women are not safe in gyms – not safe anywhere at all'. Gill uses this example to express her unease about the prevailing narrative on women's safety. She acknowledges that there exist dangers, but also points out that we are constantly bombarded with the message that

> 'women are not safe walking home at night, not safe on public transport, not safe in gyms. It is drummed home at every opportunity'.

She then asks:

> 'is it possible that this narrative – that women are perpetually at great risk in public spaces – does harm as well as good?'

Statistics show that the vast majority of attacks in public spaces are against males, not females. Attacks on women by strangers are rare, with most of the violence against women occurring within their homes. Similarly, only 15% of rapes are committed by strangers

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[239] Two days later, *The Guardian*'s editorial board published their op-ed 'The Guardian view on indecent exposure: a crime that must be taken seriously', which made clear that the editorial board supported the law & order approach and viewed 'indecent exposure' as a 'gateway crime'.
[240] https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2023/mar/05/lone-woman-fights-attacker-inspring-proof-inherent-danger-maybe-both

(ibid.). However, the media gives significant attention to the few attacks on women by strangers in public, which instils fear in women. They fear being raped by random men lurking in the darkness.

The trouble is, Gill notes, that in a patriarchy, violence against women in public spaces is not an end in itself but rather a form of control. It serves to keep women out of public spaces, which is exactly what the exaggerated media coverage and fearmongering about women being raped in the streets achieve. In fact, the discourse surrounding women's safety in public spaces does a more effective job at keeping women at home than an actual epidemic of sexual violence or 'indecent exposure' ever would. As Gill says, 'women police themselves'.

Conclusion: ethics and the monstrosity of my naked body

I began this chapter with a discussion of my poorly-received attempts to introduce my naked body into public spaces. When I tried to be naked in public, I was confronted and even physically attacked by people who saw me as a pervert and a rapist who wanted to harm their wives and children. My attempt to explore our discomfort and fear of nudity in academia was rejected as an act of 'privileged white cis-male' violence.

I have questioned the mistaken focus on penises and male naked bodies when addressing societal violence. Both men and women often seem to construct the naked *male* body as the 'monster' that endangers their 'safe' communities. Traumatic processes of socialization that both girls and boys undergo, along with ongoing ideological campaigns in the media ensure that people disconnect from their bodies, become uncomfortable around naked bodies, and learn to fear 'perverts' everywhere. This, I have suggested, prevents men and women from exploring *together* the shaming and prohibition of their own bodies, and whether a different – not necessarily more dangerous! – world could be possible without the *taboo* of nudity.

Additionally, ideologically-constructed fears not only become a cage that prevents people from exploring their (posthumanist) freedom – but they also incite violent reactions against anyone who dares to defy the *taboo*. Danger-beliefs akin to those described by Durkheim and

Douglas police society's *taboos* while ensuring that people remain unaware of the religious nature of their policing function. People genuinely believe in the 'dangers' they seek to protect themselves and their community from – they view their policing of transgressors as the 'right' thing to do.

This creates a major ethical problem, which I explore in the next chapter. In a society where most people are genuinely afraid of the 'dangers' posed by nudity, is it right for me to dismiss their fears as 'ideological'? If many people genuinely perceive my naked body as a 'monster' – and they feel uncomfortable around my nudity, – is it ethically acceptable for me to reason that they are 'wrong' and seek freedom anyway? Or should I surrender my reflective practice of freedom in the face of a society that collectively endorses the established order, its religious taboos, and genuinely believes in the 'dangers' that arise from breaching them?

PART 4: PAUSE FOR REFLECTION

Chapter 6: Discomfort and the modesty cult: to embrace disorder, or to fall in line to avoid upsetting people?

> '*It is the job of revolutions to shock, to provoke, and to upset, not to behave or to be polite*' (Eltahawy, 2015: 226)

> '*Decolonization, which sets out to change the order of the world, is clearly an agenda for total disorder*' (Fanon, 2004: 2)

<u>Introduction</u>

I must pause. Before continuing my naked body's adventures in the clothed world from which it is normally banned, I need to reflect on what I have learned so far – and decide how (*if*) to continue my exploration. My main realization has been that many people find my naked body and non-conformity to the norm of clothedness *genuinely* frightening. They see me as a monster and a threat to their communities. While I understand these fears as ideological constructions meant to uphold the established religious order, I cannot ignore the genuine feelings and reactions they produce. Exploring my freedom to experiment with alternative ways of being – beyond the established order of things, – has put me at odds with normalized society.

Therefore, I must take a moment to reflect. Are my explorations and critical practices worth the risks? Is it 'right' for me to challenge the normal order of things? And yet: if experimenting with doing things 'differently' turns individuals into 'monsters' or 'public enemies', how can we ever explore alternative social orders?

To some extent, this pause for reflection has been forced upon me. When I began this PhD project at Birkbeck, University of London, my intention was to explore people's reactions to my nudity in various settings, to better understand their perspectives. I wanted to conduct social experiments involving public nudity to test the limits of what is possible within the existing order. Unfortunately, the ethical guidelines of my university prohibited such project, which would have involved non-consensually exposing random members of the public to my nudity hence (most likely) causing them non-consensual discomfort. Non-consensually exposing people to nudity is, I was told, 'unethical'[241]. Thus, I was not allowed to explore whether I can exist in my society without conforming to its religious rule of clothedness, as such disobedience inevitably makes many people uncomfortable, and is therefore supposedly 'unethical'.

The response to my research proposal by the university is significant because it highlights the ethical dilemma inherent in a reflective practice of *disorder*, which I discuss in the first part of this chapter. The university, an institution supposedly dedicated to the advancement of critical thinking, cannot support any *genuine* attempt to critique the dominant ideology, because it equates 'ethical practice' with conforming to the moral code of the dominant ideology (as Nietzsche's says: 'To be moral, virtuous, and praiseworthy means to yield obedience to ancient law and hereditary usage; HH 96).

This same argument, which condemns my lack of conformity to societal clothing norms as 'unethical', is often framed in terms of 'consent'. Today's consensus is that ethical practices should be consensual – this view has become so prevalent that even my 4-year-old daughter frequently invokes her 'lack of consent' when I ask her do things she doesn't want to do(!). However, there is very little conversation in public discourse about the *boundaries* of consent: that is, what actions require consent, and what don't? By simply invoking the necessity of consent, without specifying *whose* consent is required and for *what* actions, the concept of 'consent' becomes meaningless (arguably, seen from different perspectives, *most* things that happen in society are non-consensual). Labelling my choice to be unclothed 'non-

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[241] Albeit lawful in England (Appendix A), public nudity is nonetheless perceived by most as 'indecent', immoral, unethical.

consensual' and 'unethical', or even 'violent', overlooks the critical issue of *whose consent* is relevant in relation to my clothing choices.

There is nothing new in noting that radical practices, which reject established values, are considered unethical by the majority. It is commonly said that revolutions can only be justified retrospectively, after they succeed and shape the narrative. Prior to that, revolutions are perceived as acts of violence that disrupt the order. Activists and radical thinkers who openly reject societal norms are frequently rejected and marginalized by their communities, facing humiliation and even criminalization. They are usually turned into heroes or saints only after their death, following lives plagued by loneliness, suffering, confrontation, and personal sacrifice. In the eyes of their contemporaries, their attempt to challenge the *status quo* were inherently 'unethical' (examples abound, from Galileo to Benjamin Lay, the suffragettes, Mahatma Gandhi, and Nelson Mandela to name just a few). Surely, in the past, research projects on racism, sexism, slavery, homosexuality, etc. would have been deemed 'unethical' by universities.

Many assume that the isolation and criminalization of radical thinkers are relics of the past or occur only among uncivilized societies. I disagree: *any* society evaluates moral and political controversies through the lens of its own ideology, which blinds it to its own shortcomings. Almost everyone today agrees that racial segregation, European colonialism, and the Nazi extermination of Jews were 'wrong'. And yet, however incomprehensible it may seem, most individuals from my grandparents' generation in the U.S., Europe, and Germany supported these acts. It is extraordinarily difficult to think differently from the norm in any given time and place, due to the lack of alternative established discourses that could help see things differently. When people think alike, they inevitably arrive at similar conclusions.

A major hurdle in my attempt to question my society's prohibition of public nudity is the lack of an established discourse for me to rely on. Those who see me naked in a normally-clothed space, instantly see me as a pervert, a rapist, a paedophile: because they see me through the ideological lens they have available. It is perhaps an instance of what philosopher Miranda Fricker (2009) calls 'epistemic injustice'. To begin to address this epistemic injustice, in this chapter I draw parallels between my struggle to free my body from its clandestinity and other

struggles which are in *some* respects similar, but which are sufficiently historically/culturally distant that modern Westerners are capable to assess them critically. Instead of trying to make sense of my predicament relying on the usual, established academic discourse on Western bodies and gender politics, which is ideologically tied to the societal practices I am questioning, I seek to encourage *alternative* ways of thinking by situating my struggle within comparable discourses that Westerners adopt in relation to distant others – and which make critique possible.

And so, in the second part of this chapter, I reflect on the similarities between my struggle to expose my naked body and struggles that are taking place elsewhere against religious modesty culture. I suggest that these struggles against modesty culture are *fundamentally similar* to mine, regardless of whether they are about female modesty or male modesty, and regardless of whether they take place in Islamic Egypt, in Christianized Nigeria, or in supposedly-secular England. Across such different cultures and historical/social contexts, the rationale for modesty standards and the psycho-social dynamics that protect the clothed order are analogous – and so is the reaction faced by rebels refusing to conform. Observers from distant cultures hail those who challenge the bigotry of their contemporaries as heroes, but their own societies see them as villains. The question of whether an ethical practice of immodesty is worth the social and psychological cost of being perceived as a public enemy is common to me and to the women who challenge their societies' modesty standards.

This chapter is organized as follows. I begin with a reflection on discomfort and its role in protecting the established order from the threat of difference and disorder (sections 1-2). I suggest that we embrace disorder and any resulting discomfort – however, this requires a non-consensual approach, which is problematic (sections 3-4). Bringing the focus back to my exploration of nudity, I frame it as a challenge to Western male modesty standards (sections 5-6). I note the analogy between Western clothing mandates and Islamic ones (section 7), and I discuss Mona Eltahawy's struggle against her modesty culture (sections 8-9). Similar struggles are also happening in Christian Nigeria (sections 10-11), and Victoria Bateman is attempting to embrace her nudity in Britain (section 12). Increasingly aware of the extreme difficulty of engaging in consensual disorderly practices, I turn to writers who have theorised the need for violence to change the order and explored the use of nudity in anti-systemic

rebellion (section 13). Ultimately, I conclude that violent (non-consensual) rebellion is probably the only way forward, but its personal cost is too high.

1. Policing discomfort

Fig. 19 Posters displayed in the student bar at SOAS, The School of Oriental and African Studies of the University of London

'We want you to have a good night out. If something or someone makes you feel **uncomfortable**, no matter how minor it seems, you can report it to any member of our staff and they will work with you to make sure it doesn't have to ruin your night'.

These posters are displayed[242] on the walls of the student bar at SOAS – the School of Oriental and African Studies of the University of London (Fig. 19). They are designed to address very real issues around sexual violence against women, and the understandable sense of unsafety female students may have in a crowded student bar where they may find themselves in a vulnerable position (perhaps drinking, surrounded by potentially unsafe males, etc.). And yet, however important it is for the university to protect its students from potential assaults and violence, I am troubled by these posters. They reveal how 'ethics' and affective attachment to the established order are harnessed in defence of that order.

To be clear, I do not condone abuse, aggression, or violence against students or staff – but these SOAS posters do *not* refer to abuse, aggression, or violence. They refer to the possibility that '*something or someone makes you feel **uncomfortable**, no matter how minor it seems*'. Let us pause and reflect here: how and why did the right 'not to be made to feel uncomfortable' become a protected right, which society takes upon itself to uphold? Because these posters are clear: SOAS seeks to protect students from *feelings of discomfort – even minor ones.*

It is an interesting exercise to consider what might cause someone to feel 'uncomfortable'. We all feel uncomfortable if we experience a violent aggression – although, in that case, 'uncomfortable' may not be the most appropriate word. Criticism and confrontation can also make us feel uncomfortable. In Western societies, many people feel uncomfortable around individuals with darker skin tones (particularly males). Some individuals in the Christian world also feel uncomfortable around people who openly display their affiliation with other faiths or cultural communities, such as women wearing headscarves. Additionally, many people feel uncomfortable around immigrants and foreigners.

Even individuals who work in universities can feel uncomfortable around foreigners. When I was working in the Philosophy department at the University of California, Riverside, a member of the administrative staff in the English department called security on me after overhearing me speak in Italian on my mobile phone (which she apparently referred to as a

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[242] At the time of writing.

'walkie-talkie') while carrying a 'suspiciously large bag' (which contained my students' essays) in the department lobby.

Many people feel uncomfortable around homosexuals or around individuals who do not conform to traditional gender norms. The examples are endless: most people feel uncomfortable when they smell others' body odours, or when they cannot understand the social context, or when others around them do not adhere to the social norms they expect. In fact, any difference or behaviour that deviates from social norms or disrupts the normal order of things, making the situation unexpected and unpredictable, is likely to cause discomfort for someone. We must be *very* cautious about attempting to shield individuals from 'feelings of discomfort'.

Of course, not all forms of discomfort are deemed worthy of protection. The discomfort experienced by those who make *us* uncomfortable, those who are (or appear) 'different' from 'us', is generally not protected in the same way as *our own* discomfort. The right to be protected from discomfort is unevenly distributed. In general, protection from discomfort reflects what is deemed acceptable within the existing social order, entrenched moral norms, and positions of power (insiders vs outsiders)[243].

If my contention is correct that feelings of discomfort and danger often arise in connection with encounters with otherness and taboos[244], then protecting people from discomfort is equivalent to enforcing the established order[245]. Contrary to what many claim, protecting people from discomfort is not about 'inclusivity': it's a conservative, exclusionary political act. It's a power play executed by insiders against anything that disrupt the established order or deviate from the norm.

A common argument for prohibiting public nudity is that nudity makes many uncomfortable – even absent an obvious threat, the sight of someone naked in public makes people uncomfortable. This discomfort is generally accepted as a valid reason to prohibit nudity. In

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[243] We should also probably *not* entrust institutions like university or the police to handle 'discomfort'.
[244] See Chapters 2 and 5.
[245] People tend to prioritize protecting from discomfort those they perceive as similar to themselves, while disregarding or not understanding the discomfort experienced by those who seem different.

England, the law criminalizes nudity that is (intentionally) 'alarming' or 'distressing' regardless of considerations of *actual* danger[246]. 'Indecent exposure' laws aim to protect people from *uncomfortable feelings* – from their perception of nudity as 'potentially dangerous' – rather than from *actual* dangers. However, is this the way things should be? Let's discuss.

2. Ethics, discomfort, consent

Critical practices that challenge established norms often face accusations of being 'unethical'. They are typically non-consensual, and cause 'discomfort' to the norm-abiding majority. Rejecting established norms is seen as implicitly criticizing the moral community, which can lead to accusations of immorality. Concepts such as the 'moral community', 'popular consent', and 'protection from discomfort' are closely intertwined and inseparable from the ongoing obedience to established norms that define a moral community. I believe that meaningful social criticism requires moving away from thinking in these terms; Foucauldian and Nietzschean ethics – *ethics as the reflective practice of freedom* – is incompatible with the goal of protecting society from discomfort or obtaining the consent of the moral community.

Above, I puzzled over a SOAS poster which asks students to report 'anything or anyone' making them 'uncomfortable'. While I understand the context of these posters, which aim to create a safe environment for women by addressing issues of sexual harassment and violence, I am troubled by their use of the term 'discomfort'. This term could also encompass situations where students feel uncomfortable due to the presence of others who exhibit differences that disrupt the established order of things. In the past, racial segregation was justified precisely on the basis that black people were making whites 'uncomfortable'. Similarly to how naked men are often perceived as potential sexual dangers to the community, black men were also viewed as potential rapists, on the lookout for 'prays'

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[246] Appendix A. Arguably, even in many instances of criminal 'flashing', there is no *actual* danger: what dangers does a man standing naked (or *even masturbating!)* by the roadside pose to passing cars or even bicycles? – except for potentially distracting drivers.

('fantasizing about offending', in Monckton-Smith's ever-disturbing words[247]), and posing a threat to women and children. Margaret Mitchell tells us in *Gone with the Wind* that the Ku Klux Klan was created because of the

> 'large number of outrages on women and the ever-present fear for the safety of their wives and daughters' (2021: 441) [248].

Due to these concerns about the sexual safety of their wives and daughters, the white majority in segregation-era U.S. would never have *consented* to allowing black men to freely roam their safe and orderly neighbourhoods. Anyone who challenged racial segregation and non-consensually intruded into the 'safe' spaces reserved for whites would have been deemed 'unethical' (and research projects seeking to challenge racial segregation *in practice* would have equally been deemed unethical by universities).

Thanks to our historical and ideological distance, we now recognize those fears as an ideological effect. The correlation between blackness and being a rapist is comparable to that between 'indecent exposure' and rape: non-existent, or epiphenomenal at best. While some rapists happened to be black, the media's coverage of rapes committed by black people fuelled fear and led the public to believe in a correlation between blackness and propensity to sexual violence. At the time, however, most white people – including academics – believed those fears to be real. Writing in the respected journal *Medicine* in 1903, Dr. William Lee Howard explanation of the sexual dangers posed by Negroes echo contemporary views on 'indecent exposers' as discussed in Chapter 5:

> 'In the increase of rape on white women, we see the explosion of a long train of antecedent preparation. The attacks on defenceless white women are evidence of racial instincts that are about as amenable to ethical culture as is the inherent odor of the race.' (in Fredrickson, 1971: 279)

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[247] See Chapter 5.

[248] Similarly, Thomas Dixon Jr.'s *The Clansman* – and its film adaptation *The Birth of Nation* – depict a black man raping a white girl, which leads to both the girl and her mother commit suicide. Along similar lines, Senator James Buchanan of Texas voiced the public's fear of Negroes' 'diabolical crime of rape upon the white women' (Holden-Smith: 55). Representative Benjamin Tillman from South Caroline vowed to protect 'our girls and womenfolk' (ibid.). The examples are countless, and the moral panic lasted unabated for decades.

This is why, if we acknowledge that perceptions of safety and danger are socially constructed[249], we must vehemently reject misguided ethical principles that aim to protect others from discomfort[250]. The principle remains the same regardless of whether the 'source' of discomfort is a black man, a gay man, or a naked man.

Focussing on 'consent' as the foundation of ethical practice is also problematic, I noted above, unless we previously establish *whose* consent is required and for *what*. We must first define the *boundaries* within which consent is required. It is unrealistic to expect people to consent to everything they are exposed to in the public spaces. Every day, we encounter things we have not consented to, and which may make us uncomfortable – some individuals are disturbed by large polluting cars, others by dogs in urban spaces, others by immigrants or gender non-conforming people. Should we label all such unwanted and non-consensual exposure as 'violence' and claim a 'right' to be shielded from it?

Recently, I read a discussion on the social network *FetLife* about whether it is ethically acceptable for rubber-lovers to wear their latex gear in public – by wearing latex in public, do individuals 'non-consensually' expose others to their kinks? In that *FetLife* discussion, most participants agreed that the clothes one wears fall outside the scope of consent – I believe the same approach should apply to any choices of (un)dress[251]. Implicit in many criticisms I have received is the idea that my choice of dress (or of *undress*) requires the consent of those who may see me – but this seems hugely problematic, for it assumes I should surrender control over my body to the established morality and to those who claim to represent it.

Hence, I reject the view that ethical practice requires that we protect people from discomfort or obtain their consent prior to exposing them to discomfort. In the next section, I present sociologist Richard Sennett's argument that discomfort is often 'good' and that instead of banishing it, we should instead seek to *increase* the level of discomfort in our social interactions and become 'comfortable' with it.

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[249] See 5.8 above.
[250] And/or that require others' consent prior to exposing them to potentially uncomfortable situations.
[251] Betty Martin (2021) argues that we are not responsible for how others feel about us – that is *their* problem.

3. The Uses of Disorder

In *The Uses of Disorder*, Sennett draws on the work of philosophers Martin Buber and Emmanuel Levinas to explore the human fear of disorder. Dealing with real people and social interactions is a messy affair, exposing us to unexpected and unpredictable situations. Being with others reveals our lack of control over the world, over people and over situations. It also exposes us to various risks, particularly the risk of getting hurt. In this context, stable identities emerge as a defence against the uncertainties of the unknown, the unexpected, and the potentially painful.

Sennett explains that stable identities are initially adopted in adolescence, when young people gain the freedom to act but lack the experience to navigate social interactions effectively. Unable to handle painful, confusing, and contradictory experiences that they will encounter in life, young people adopt identities that enable them to construct a semblance of an orderly self and an orderly social structure in which they belong. Drawing upon the work of psychoanalysts Erik Erikson and Heinz Hartmann, Sennett describes identity as 'a conscious way of forming the rules by which one places oneself in social space' (1970: 118). When we adopt an identity, we create a sense of order – albeit an illusory one – that serves as a protective shield:

> 'In this way, the experiential frame is controlled in advance; its impact on the reality a youth perceive is muffled because unexpected or painful new experiences are rejected as unreal. They don't fit into the schemes of coherent order the young person is now able to articulate consciously to himself' (1970: 37)

By excluding anything that doesn't fit into their idealized order, young people convince themselves that they live in an orderly totality, which protects them from the unknown, risks, and harms that messy reality might expose them to. To protect their (fragile) stable identities, they also shield themselves from new experiences that could undermine their identities.

Therefore, it is quite normal for young people to shy away from unfamiliar and unpredictable social situations and to cling to the familiar and orderly world they feel comfortable in.

In theory, this protective shield that identities give us should not be needed anymore as individuals grow older and (hopefully) become able to handle the messiness of real social interactions. However, Sennett argues that people become accustomed to the comfort of their identities and orderly world. What starts as adolescent psychology evolves into the normal mindset of most adults. People carefully avoid social interactions that may be disrupt the orderly totality they have constructed for themselves. They actively try to build a world based on sameness, excluding or marginalizing otherness, because otherwise 'we might be hurt by our own exploration of otherness' (1970: 43)[252].

Studying the geographical segregation of differently-racialized groups within Western cities, Sennett describes a pattern where those who can afford it, seek to shield themselves from messy, disorderly, *uncomfortable* social spaces. They become accustomed to the comfort of their orderly, coherent existence and afraid of situations they cannot control. This fear of the unknown and disorder means that people effectively choose their own slavery and self-repression:

> 'It is inescapable that the people involved in this desire for coherence *actively* seek their own slavery and self-repression' (ibid: 40)

It is crucial to highlight the *affective* dimension of this tendency, which leads people to '*actively* seek their own slavery and self-repression'. People are not *passive* creatures manipulated by the system – they do not *mindlessly* obey norms:

> 'Usually discussions of conformity to mass values and mores have treated the human beings involved as being, at their worst, passive creatures manipulated by an impersonal system. Thus is there supposed conformity without pleasure, mindless

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[252] The exclusion of otherness is never complete, because we need it as a term of comparison to maintain a sense of sameness.

obedience to the norms. This is much too flattering a picture of the human impulses at work.' (ibid.)

On the contrary, Sennett tells us that 'the impulse to create a repressive order arise *naturally* out of men's lives' (ibid: 103)

People's wish to protect themselves from unknown and unpredictable social situations is even stronger in group settings. Communities come together, Sennett argues, precisely to shield their members from the risk of unknown and thus potentially painful encounters:

> 'Communally painful experiences, unknown social situations full of possible surprise
> and challenge can be avoided by the common consent of a community to believe they
> already know the meaning of those experiences and have drawn the lessons from
> them together' (ibid.: 38)

There are endless examples of communities that come together to exclude encounters with otherness by common consent. When this happens, the exclusion of otherness is motivated by commonly accepted arguments: the participants 'already know' about the experience they are excluding and therefore agree to exclude it. Sennett gives the obvious examples of white middle-class residential communities in U.S. suburbia excluding 'dangerous' black people[253].

Could it be that similar psychosocial processes underlie many people's attitudes towards nudity? Could it be that the discomfort and fear that many experience towards nudity – towards their own nudity as well as that of others – masks un underlying insecurity about the metaphysical order they inhabit and their fragile identities? Could it be that people enforce the exclusion of the body from public spaces to defend the stability and safety of the established (religious) order? Could it be that the 'discomfort' many feel around naked bodies (including their own) is really just a feeling of being 'outside of their comfort zone' – a fear of the unknown?

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[253] Even though the 'dangerous' black people are in fact wealthy professionals who can afford such 'exclusive' communities.

4. Embracing disorder and de-segregation

Sennett's discussion of how feelings of discomfort and danger protect a 'safe' social order and a sense of 'community' based on sameness – on the exclusion of otherness – takes me back to the realization that the prohibition of public nudity in Western societies is enforced by people's fears. Encounters with nudity make people uncomfortable and afraid. People justify their fear of nudity through associations with sexual violence and rape – to protect 'vulnerable women and children' – which are reminiscent of the reasons given by frightened white people in racially-segregated U.S.

In segregation-era U.S., black folks were not seen as political subjects worthy of protection. I suggest that the political relationship between whites and blacks in segregated U.S. is reproduced in *analogous* terms in the relationship between (naked) bodies and clothed persons ('souls'). The body (as opposed to the disembodied person/soul) is not granted subjectivity in today's West; legal rights are attached to personhood. Bodies have rights only insofar as they *belong* to persons – just like slaves did. My readers might balk at this suggestion of bodies having rights or subjectivity independently of the persons/souls to whom they belong – yet most whites, in a different time and age, would have dismissed as ridiculous the idea of slaves having their own rights independently of their owners. Perhaps, the truly unethical relationship in our world is that between souls ('persons') and bodies.

Sennett's ideas on racial segregation in urban public spaces could be relevant to my problem of body segregation. As a solution to the ideologically-constructed fears and perceptions of danger that keep cities racially segregated, Sennett proposes that urban planners 'force' different people to mix together. To overcome largely imaginary and ideological fears about 'dangerous' others, which make people ban 'monsters' from their 'safe communities', Sennett wants people to actually *encounter* the monstrous otherness they are so afraid of. People would then see for themselves that their fears were imaginary – and let them go. Mixing with 'dangerous' otherness and 'monsters' would allow people to overcome their fears and enjoy a freer life.

Following my analogy between racial and anti-body segregation, I believe that people could overcome their fears by casually encountering naked bodies – both their own bodies and the bodies of others. Perhaps, bodies would then stop appearing 'dangerous' to them, as scary monsters. As Agamben says, behind the veil of their fears, people would see 'a simple, inapparent human body' (2011b: 90). Disorder, by forcing people to encounter otherness and overcome their fear of it, is a path to freedom:

> 'Only a truly chaotic urban life can challenge the slavery patterns of adolescence so that large numbers of young people have the opportunity to grow now accorded only to a few' (1970: 135).

In *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments* (2019), writer Saidiya Hartman describes an example of such 'truly chaotic urban life' as it happened in early 20th century Harlem. Exclusion by the white, respectable ('human') society forced the racialized/animalized others to embrace chaos and otherness – thus learning to see 'order' as a form of control. As Foucault (2000) says, the fascism that is in all of us feeds off our fear; the more we let go of our fear of chaos, disorder, and otherness, and the freer we become: Hartman's characters, despite being poor and oppressed, are also freer than most. Hartman, like Foucault, reminds us that the religious/ideological fears of otherness that protect the social order can be overcome by simply encountering that 'scary' otherness and becoming used to existing in a less-orderly world.

However, there is a major problem with Sennett's approach. Acknowledging that people (generally) do *not* want to let go of their safe, orderly, predictable worlds to encounter otherness and disorder, Sennett suggests that urban planners '*force*' people to mix together. However: can disorder really be *imposed* on a society from above? What elected administration would re-organize the urban spaces in ways that force people to mix with the otherness they fear? And would such non-consensual imposition of disorder be 'ethical'?

Sennett's proposal may be wishful thinking. Although he is probably right in saying that disorder and encountering otherness is the answer to people's ideologically-constructed fears, disorder is unlikely to ever be imposed by those in charge of the order. Realistically, a

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programme of disorder can only be carried out by those excluded by the order. Yet, these outsiders will be portrayed as criminals as soon as they rebel to the order – especially without an established discourse supporting their rebellion.

Unfortunately, at present, there is no established discourse supporting the struggle against the segregation of our bodies out of the public space. To address this epistemic injustice, in what follows I draw a parallel between my attempt to stop hiding my body and others' attempts to defy societal modesty standards, albeit with different bodies and/or in different societies. I begin in the next sections by highlighting and problematizing the invisible (to insiders) fact of Western male modesty, which (I suggest) is *essentially analogous* to the often-discussed issue of female modesty in distant ('uncivilized') societies.

5. Western male modesty

Often, when I get dressed and I am ready to leave home, my wife tells me that I am dressed inappropriately. Perhaps my shorts are too short, or I am exposing too much of my midriff, or my top is 'inappropriately' see-through for the school run. Friends have made similar comments: as a man, I should keep my belly covered, swimming costumes should cover my buttocks, etc. Those who criticize my attire say that people might feel offended, or that nobody wants to see a man's belly/bum/etc.

I do not know other men who routinely have such conversations with their family and friends: because I do not know other men who defy the rules of Western male dress and dress 'inappropriately'. I have never heard male friends complain about the clothing restrictions they face in their everyday life. Some may assume that the general lack of complaints by men means Western men are free to wear whatever they choose – that no modesty standards apply to them, – but this is not true. I begin by highlighting the largely invisible (to our insider perspective) fact of Western *male* modesty culture.

Western modesty standards are rarely problematized in the Western public debate. Westerners discuss modesty culture in relation to other societies, especially Islamic ones:

many Westerners agree that Islamic societies use modesty standards to oppress women. Conversely, it appears to be a common view that no significantly restrictive modesty standards apply to Western societies[254].

Western women occasionally complain about their own modesty standards – for example, about the differential treatment of male and female nipples – but few seem to really care. Here in England, where all nipples are legally permitted[255], I have *never* seen women taking advantage of their equal rights to normalize their nipples – nor am I aware of campaigns to allow female toplessness in pools[256]. Although I do understand how uncomfortable public toplessness would be for women, at least initially[257], it is obvious that many Western women are more indignant about the unfairness of Islamic modesty standards than about those they comply with.

Anyway – here I want to talk about *men*. As a man, across Western societies, I am expected to hide my flesh[258]. In everyday settings, I am expected to conceal my midriff and upper thighs; shoulders, cleavage, and feet are only allowed in casual settings. Men's formal and evening dress is much more 'modest' than its female equivalent – it would be unthinkable for a man in a formal or business space to expose his feet, legs, shoulders, or back. The difference – the additional modesty rules that apply to men compared to women – is noticeable in casual spaces too.

To test the limits of male modesty standards, I have been experimenting with exposing more skin than is deemed socially acceptable for European men. To the gym, I have been wearing short crop tops and micro-shorts, items that women may wear – and I have not felt comfortable. At a public gym in North London, I was informed that my attire (Fig. 20), while

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[254] And to Islamic men: however, to the extent that Islamic men do obey restrictive modesty standards, this is often seen as their own choice in support of the oppressive patriarchal regime they are in charge of.

[255] UK laws on 'indecent exposure' are only concerned with the exposure of genitals (see Appendix A). The exposure of breasts, whether male or female, is *never* unlawful.

[256] Campaigns to allow women to be topless in public swimming pool have been successfully run in Germany (https://www.theguardian.com/travel/2023/mar/25/berlin-welcomes-topless-female-swimmers-in-victory-for-activists) and in Catalunya (https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-66029635).

[257] Arguably, the discomfort of public toplessness would quickly diminish/disappear as it becomes less rare.

[258] In heteronormative spaces. My discussion here doesn't apply to queer spaces, where different rules apply, but queer spaces are the exception and not the norm.

not explicitly prohibited, was making some other gym-goers (Figs. 21-22) uncomfortable. I was asked to cover up[259]. On another occasion (different gym), I was greeted by a group of young males with comments like 'Fuck, bro', and 'Look bro'. It became clear that their issue was with the amount of skin I was showing: 'Bro, he thinks he's going swimming!' Another time (different gym, again), a manager confronted me for wearing shorts that were supposedly 'too short' for men[260].

On one occasion, I was even escorted out of a central London pub[261] for wearing an outfit that was deemed 'indecent' (Fig. 23). They stated that 'nudity' was not allowed on their premises. Even at the beach, notwithstanding the issue of uneven cultural norms around nipples, men's swimwear is usually *more* modest than women's swimwear. Men often cover up *more* of their bodies compared to women (Figs. 24-25)[262].

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[259] My outfit would have been perfectly appropriate had I been a young woman, of course. I felt too ashamed to ask which part of my body was making others uncomfortable – and *who* was feeling uncomfortable.
[260] On this occasion, I argued my point and the manager let me stay.
[261] The Penderel's Oak, 283-288 High Holborn, London.
[262] When I lived in California, men often ridiculed my 'short shorts' – all other men wore knee-length shorts.

Fig. 20 Modelling the outfit that made people uncomfortable at the gym.

Fig. 21 Normal male attire at my local gym, for comparison.

Fig. 22 Other men at my gym

Western male modesty goes beyond concealing skin; it also involves hiding the *shape* of our bodies – hence men do not wear leggings[263] or 'bodycon' dresses. It is considered inappropriate ('disgusting') for a man's bulge to be visible through his clothing. Even at the beach, many men now wear cotton underwear under their swimming trunks to over-protect their 'modesty' (Figs. 25-26): I can't help but question how different this is from Victorian women who not only covered their

breasts, but also wore tight corsets to hide   their

Male bodies, in Western gyms, tend to be much more covered than female bodies. When exercising, I prefer the freedom of women's gym attire. Yet, by doing so, I make people uncomfortable: why? What is the 'discomfort' some experience seeing a male belly or/and male thighs?

presence under their clothing?

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[263] And when they do, they usually wear shorts on top of them.

Fig. 23 I was thrown out of a London pub for wearing this.

The manager said 'nudity' was not allowed.

Fig. 24 Normal European beach dress code (Sanremo, Italy, summer 2023)

Fig. 25 More European beach dress code:

this is Portugal, summer 2024.
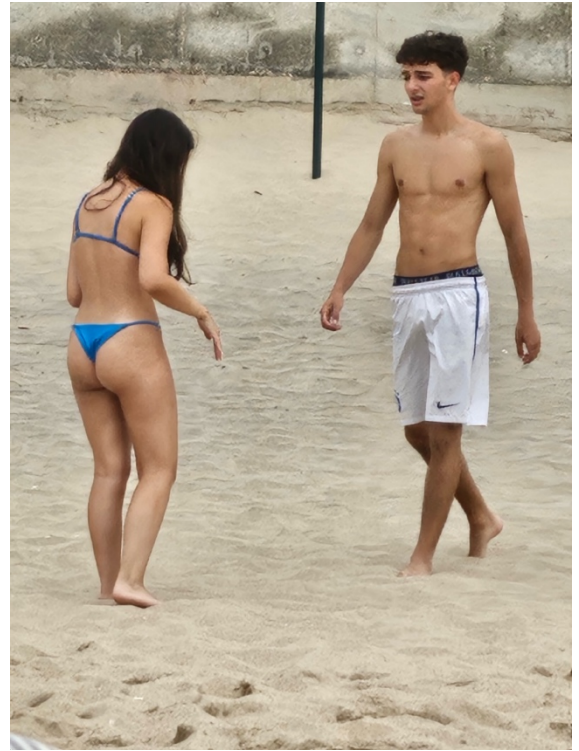
Fig. 26 Man wearing underwear under his swimming trunks at the beach, for additional modesty (Portugal, summer 2024).

Despite the ongoing disparity in the treatment of male vs. female nipples, Western modesty rules require men to conceal more skin than women do. Additionally, as you can see in these photos, among the younger males it has become common to wear regular cotton underwear under their swimming shorts – is it for extra modesty? Is it at all comfortable, especially when wet? Could someone explain to me why?

Fig. 27 Me being immodest in a g-string (Portugal, summer 2024)

For wearing this blue g-string on a beach in Fregene, near Rome, I was abused by a normal-looking middle-aged Italian man who got really angry, said my attire was 'completely inappropriate', and I shouldn't come to the beach wearing 'underwear'. But, if this is 'underwear', aren't all women wearing 'underwear' at the beach? Should we all start swimming in normal underwear + shorts as per the latest male trend? Why?

6. Problematizing Western male modesty

Most men seem completely unbothered by the dress restrictions they face. Perhaps they are not even aware of complying with modesty standards, for these seem 'obvious' or 'natural' to them. Mothers sometimes complain about how boys' clothing is dull compared to girls', but I don't hear grown men complaining about how dull their own adult clothes are.

In her essay *There is no unmarked woman* (1993), linguist Deborah Tannen criticizes the fact that Western women cannot dress in ways that make their bodies disappear and become invisible, as is normal for men. Implicit in her argument is a desire for women to have access to the same body-invisibility men have access to. I am interest in the other side of the problem: I seek to free male bodies from their compulsory invisibility. In modern Western society[264] this is not easy: to escape body-invisibility, I buy my everyday clothes from online shops that specialize in 'queer clubbing gear', or from women's sections. Men do not seem interested in challenging their modesty standards.

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[264] It wasn't always like this. Our modern Western, 'invisible' male dress was introduced in the 19th century (Sennett, 2002).

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To women who want to escape objectification, Western male modesty standards might seem a blessing. However, what about my right to do what I want with my own body? – to expose it to sunlight, fresh air, and even the gaze of others? Isn't this, *essentially*, the same right that is claimed for Islamic women who are expected to wear headscarves or hide their bodies in other ways? Notwithstanding the important differences between the clothing restrictions imposed on Western men and those imposed on Muslim women, I want to seriously consider the similarities between these restrictions. Male modesty, although rarely discussed, is closely linked to female modesty – *it shares the same cultural and religious origins*.

While Western discussions of modesty often focus solely on Islamic female modesty, the idea that *modest* clothing serves to divert attention away from the body is also crucial in Christianity and it applies to *both* men and women. Modesty of dress is an important principle in Christianity, as it shifts the focus from the body to the 'person' – to the 'soul'. In *Love and Responsibility*, Karol Wojtyla (Pope John Paul II) writes that the value of a person becomes apparent as one conceals the presence of the body:

> 'The spontaneous need to conceal the sexual values linked to the person is a natural way to unveil the value of the person himself.' (1981: 179)

Conversely, 'immodesty' consists of obscuring the value of the person through clothing that exposes the body:

> 'What is [immodest] in dress is that which clearly contributes to a deliberate obscuring of the most essential value of the person by the sexual values' (ibid.)

While modern Western women may defy these Christian principles to draw attention to their bodies[265], *male* modern Western dress standards do obey the principles of modesty. As I discuss below, the Christian principles of modesty are essentially analogous to the Islamic ones, despite differences in scope and in how they apply to genders.

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[265] This is often encouraged or even expected, arguably because of power dynamics within Western patriarchy (see 5.2 above). However, an in-depth discussion of this is beyond the scope of this work and would distract from the point I seek to focus on.

Western men's compliance with their modesty standards is reminiscent of the prevailing attitude among Muslim women, the majority of whom willingly embrace modesty. Muslim women often say that their modest clothing allows them to escape the constant objectification that troubles many Western women. Similarly, most men seem content to conceal their bodies – the shapeless and largely uniform clothing worn by Western men maintains their 'unmarkedness' – to borrow Tannen's phrase – and directs attention away from their bodies.

One should not dismiss the issue of Western male modesty culture simply because men do not see it as a problem. Many reasons may explain why men do not complain. Although bell hooks (2005) is probably right in saying that men – *as a category* – benefit from their position of power within patriarchy, this does not quite explain the near-universal compliance of billions of men. One reason may be that Western men are cut off from their bodies at such a young age that acknowledging the loss and resulting trauma later in life becomes unbearable, especially without a supportive social environment. Quiet, uniform compliance allows men to avoid having to deal with the pain of their unfreedom.

Additionally, the rare men who dare to challenge male modesty standards face the wrath of other males, who police heteronormative male standards. When I am out in public wearing immodest clothes (hot pants, crop tops, extreme cut-out tops, transparent outfits), I receive constant abuse from men. Whereas women are often supportive of me wearing 'immodest' clothes[266], men regularly tell me 'You are disgusting!', 'What the fuck!', 'You are a disgrace', etc[267]. Yet I wonder: why do so many men think my body is 'disgusting'? Aren't their bodies just like mine? Do they think their own bodies are 'disgusting' too? Perhaps, by universally endorsing and policing male modesty standards, men avoid having to confront their own troubled relationships to their own bodies – their unspeakable shame, legacy of a religious body-negativity which still underpins our world and which we refuse to even name, let alone confront.

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[266] I have only ever had negative reactions from women when *completely* naked. As long as my penis is covered, women do not seem to have any problems with my lack of modesty.
[267] Of course, the reactions and comments I get *may* be specific to my own body. I do not know what reactions I would get if I had a different body (different colour, age, size, etc.).

The lack of an established discourse problematizing male modesty makes it hard to talk about it. However, there *is* an established discourse problematizing female modesty standards, especially among 'uncivilized' 'undemocratic' others. Building on the common religious/cultural/historical origin of male and female, Western and Islamic modesty standards, in the following sections I discuss the experience of three women who speak out against (female) modesty in their own cultures: Mona Eltahawy in Egypt, Bibi Bakare-Yusuf in Nigeria, and Victoria Bateman in England. Notwithstanding differences between their experiences and mine, there are important similarities in our struggles and in the reaction/rejection we face from our communities. I want to focus on these similarities, because the struggle against modesty culture is not a power struggle between 'men' and 'women' but *our common struggle against a body-negative religious order*, which is defended by men and women alike. I hope my reflection below can shed new light on the issue, beyond the platitudes of mediatic and academic discourse.

7. Veiling as a choice

Rabina Khan, writing in the Guardian of 1 February 2023[268], rejects the common Western view that Muslim women wear headscarves due to patriarchal and/or religious oppression. Khan points out that 'in most parts of the world it is women who decide whether or not to wear the hijab'. The hijab, she argues, is a proud statement that women are not afraid of showing their Muslim identity.

Egyptian-born anthropologist of dress Fadwa El Guindi makes a similar argument in her book *Veil: Modesty, Privacy, Resistance*. El Guindi draws on extensive anthropological literature to argue that dress serves as a symbol of identity and status. Dress is a means of communication: 'a coded sensory system of non-verbal communication that aids human interaction'; it 'serves as a sign that the individual belongs to a certain group.' (El Guindi, 1999: 58-59). Through their choice of clothing, individuals communicate social status, or community affiliation, or gender. By wearing certain clothes, individuals signal their

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[268] https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2023/feb/01/i-proudly-wear-a-hijab-forget-the-stereotypes-its-a-sign-of-style-and-strength?CMP=share_btn_link

belonging to a society; by wearing *Islamic* dress, people express their belonging to the socio-moral Islamic community.

The Islamophobia that often accompanies discussions about veils often obscures the historical and cultural significance of the veil. Throughout history, veils and headscarves have been worn by women (*and men*) in many societies, particularly in Middle Eastern and Mediterranean regions. Even Catholic women in Southern Italy wore headscarves until relatively recently: my own grandmother used to wear a headscarf – it was normal in her Apulian village. Until recently, headscarves were also a Christian custom. In fact, the custom of veiling predates Islam, with ancient Jews and Christians also adhering to it (Gen 24.65, Isa 3.23, Cor I- 3-7).

El Guindi argues that veiling in Islam should be understood as a religious prohibition of nudity. While the scope and strength of the prohibition differs between Islam and Christianity[269], there is a fundamental similarity in how both prohibit nudity. Both religions associate certain body parts with 'sexual' connotations and prohibit their exposure. In Islam the sexual body is not prohibited, but there is a *separation* – sex is to be enjoyed in private and the public dimension of life must be de-sexualized[270]. Islam explicitly forbids sexually 'provocative' dress and behaviour (*tabarruj)* in public spaces. Any display of the body that may be interpreted as sexually suggestive[271] is considered a breach of the code as it violates the rigid separation between private and public. This breach of the separation between public and private spehers is the very definition of 'exhibitionism' (El Guindi, 1999: 136ff.). Clothes enforce this separation, and thus the religious prohibition against 'exhibitionism':

> 'Dress… is privacy's visual metaphor' (ibid.: 96).

Individuals are considered 'naked' when they expose body parts that, due to their 'sexual' nature, ought to remain 'private'. The stigma attached to 'exhibitionism' in Western societies, which see it as a 'perversion' and a crime, is inseparable from the religious prohibition of exhibitionism present in both Christianity and Islam.

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[269] El Guindi notes theological differences between the creation story in *Genesis* and the Qur'anic version of the same myth. In the Qur'an, humans were never naked, not even in the Garden of Eden ('Evidence suggests that the Islamic primordial pair were clothed lavishly immediately after they first appeared' (1999: 75). Therefore, nudity did not need a supervened prohibition (1999: 75). Perhaps, this categorical prohibition makes Islamic nudity even more 'impossible' than in Christianity.
[270] The separation is perhaps more rigid in Islam than in the post-Christian Western world.
[271] This is a vague, culturally-specific definition.

According to El Guindi, clothedness and the privacy it provides are about upholding religious and cultural principles, values, and metaphysical separations that are foundational to Arabic societies. Privacy, decorum, sanctity, reserve, and respect are different expressions of the same metaphysical separation. It is the 'centrality of the cultural notion of privacy' (ibid.). Privacy means having control over deciding who has access to one's body, and clothes serve as a gate, opening for the right people in the right circumstances, while allowing the clothed person to maintain control over their bodies and keep unwanted attention away. Intrusions are not tolerated. By dressing appropriately in Islamic cultures, individuals openly endorse these principles, values, and divisions (ibid.: 91)[272]. The 'privacy' of the body, its 'sanctity', and 'decorum' uphold the

> 'sacred divide or separation between two worlds or two spaces: deity and mortals, good and evil, light and dark, believers and nonbelievers, or aristocracy and commoners. The phrase *min wara' al-hijab* (from behind the *hijab*) emphasizes the element of separation/partition…' (ibid: 157).

These separations and principles discussed are *religious* divisions of the metaphysical space and are not universal. By embracing them, individuals signal their belonging to a *particular* society or culture[273]. This echoes Khan's claim that, for many, wearing the veil is a voluntary choice to signal their cultural and religious affiliation.

These principles apply to men as well as to women, to Western societies as well as to Islamic ones[274]. Referring to the invisibility of Western clothing mandates to Westerners, Rabina Khan says that when a colleague in London asked her why she does not take off her scarf, she replied:

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[272] Furthermore, since reputation and respectability in society depend on endorsing those principles, by wearing appropriate clothing individuals enhance their social standing in the community (ibid.). As Durkheim would have said, they show to be 'believers': for to 'believe' is to embrace the values of the community.

[273] The rise in people wearing Islamic dress since the 1970s has been seen as a statement of cultural belonging and liberation from the 'materialism' imposed by Western colonialism: 'Dress embodied a sociomoral code and served as a central vehicle for this message… the voluntary wearing of the hijab from the mid-seventies is about liberation from imposed, imported identities, consumerist behaviour, and an increasingly materialist culture' (ibid.: 168, 184).

[274] However invisible principles of modesty might appear to Westerners who happily abide by them every day.

'If you take your trousers off, I will take my scarf off' (From *The Guardian*, 1 February 2023[275])

Rabina Khan, from her outsider's perspective, accurately captures the essence of the problem. Westerners fail to appreciate that their wearing of trousers in public is a religious act *just like* wearing a headscarf is for a Muslim woman. Western men and women would not remove their trousers in public for the *same* reasons of decorum, privacy, protection, etc. that El Guindi and Khan mention as reasons for wearing a headscarf. Many Westerners are outrages that many Muslim women are not allowed to choose whether to expose or conceal their hair in public. However, shouldn't they *also be outraged* that they themselves are required to wear trousers[276]? Liberal Westerners argue that religious beliefs and practices should not be imposed upon everyone. But if that is the case, why am I not allowed to remove my trousers? In the following two sections, I discuss Mona Eltahawy's struggle against the modesty standards in her culture.

8. Mona Eltahawy and the decision not to veil

Muslim writers writing for a Western audience often have to remind their readers that for the majority of Muslims, wearing a veil is a personal choice. As of 2023, legal requirements to wear a hijab only exist in Iran and Afghanistan[277]; everywhere else, women choose to veil due to a complex combination of choice and societal/cultural/moral[278] obligations. As Khan points out, this is essentially the same as Westerners' choice to wear trousers: there is no *legal* obligation, yet powerful societal/cultural/moral forces influence people's decision to wear trousers (or other clothes serving analogous purposes). During my naked seminar talk (see Chapter 5), when I suggested that there is in England a societal/cultural prohibition of

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[275] https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2023/feb/01/i-proudly-wear-a-hijab-forget-the-stereotypes-its-a-sign-of-style-and-strength?CMP=share_btn_link
[276] Or skirts, or any other garment that conceals their 'sexual' body parts.
[277] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hijab_by_country#:~:text=In%20the%20Indonesian%20Aceh%20province,the%20hijab%20is%20not%20required.
[278] The domains of society, culture, and morality largely overlap.

public nudity that we all must adhere to, many protested, arguing that wearing clothes for them is a *free, personal choice*, and not the result of an external 'prohibition'[279].

Setting aside the motivations and psychology of the conforming majority, I am interested in the extent to which individuals have the freedom to disobey the religious/ideological/societal norms of their community. Egyptian writer Mona Eltahawy, in her book *Headscarves and Hymens*, recounts her lifelong struggle with the decision to veil or not to veil. Like El Guindi, Eltahawy agrees that veiling is about nakedness. She recalls an argument she had with Mohamed Akef, the Supreme Guide of the Muslim Brotherhood, who called her 'naked' for wearing short sleeves and no headscarf. He said to her,

> 'Your hair is naked, your arms are naked; according to God's law you are naked' (2015: 46),

Similarly, Eltahawy relates a story by Tunisian feminist activist Amira Yahyaoui. When Yahyaoui addressed a Salafist member of the Tunisian constituent assembly without wearing a headscarf, 'he refused to answer because, he said, he did not speak to women who were naked' (2015: 72).

Definition of nakedness vary. From a Western perspective, it is strange to call a woman 'naked' because she is not wearing a headscarf (especially when the man speaking is not wearing a headscarf either)—but is this really *that* different from the way in which many on Western beaches would perceive a topless woman as 'naked'[280]? When I walked into a London pub wearing a short crop top and tiny hot pants (Fig. 23), I was expelled for being 'naked'. When I cycle around London in my thong underwear, many shout at me that I am 'naked'. To be 'naked' is to breach the appropriate modesty standards – not an objective status.

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[279] The question of the extent to which we 'freely' choose to follow societal norms is complex. Individuals generally experience their obedience to core societal norms are their 'free' choice, as with the prohibition of nudity.

[280] Especially in places where female toplessness is rare and frowned upon, such as England or the U.S.

Eltahawy considers many of the reasons why women choose not to be 'naked'. These are, largely, the same mentioned by El Guindi: modesty, identity, piety, and, importantly, to avoid judgment from others (including family members) and to be left alone in male-dominated spaces (2015: 35-36). Once we adjust definitions of nakedness according to the context, these are largely the same reasons why Western women choose not to be 'naked' in public. And although standards of nakedness vary between men and women, my experience suggests that many of these reasons apply to men, too – for example, I was recently abused in the streets of London by some men who took issues with the length of my shorts ('mate, what the fuck, go home and get changed please'). And my dad recently commented on the 'inappropriate' (semi-)sheerness of my swim briefs. Just like women often choose to conceal their bodies to avoid being slut-shamed (especially by other women[281]), so men conceal their bodies to avoid negative judgment, bullying, abuse – usually, by other men.

My point is that, *beyond* the differences that apply to clothing restrictions for women and men (especially – *but not only!* – in Islamic societies) and *beyond* the differences in how the prohibition of nudity intersects with other power dynamics, the religious/societal/ideological/cultural prohibition of 'nakedness' (however defined) is a *common* fact of Abrahamic societies. And I believe it is precisely because of the common nature of the problem that liberal Western commentators cannot see it as a problem at all – all they see are the double standards adopted by *other* societies in applying the prohibition of 'nudity'.

9. To veil or not to veil? A difficult choice

Eltahawy's critique focuses on her experience of veiling in today's Middle East. However, the way she frames the problem highlights the similarities with the broader issue of the prohibition of nudity in the Christian/humanist West. She summarizes the rationale for the prohibition of nudity by saying:

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[281] See above: Chapter 5.2, Bateman (2023).

'The closer you are to God, the less I see of you' (2015: 61),

which *precisely* mirrors the Christian view I discussed in Chapter 3. She references Islamic scholar Leila Ahmed's work exploring how veiling, and the dichotomy of clothed/naked,

> 'was prevalent in pre-Islamic society, and not just in Arabia but in Mediterranean and Mesopotamian civilizations that predated Christianity. It was used, among other things, to differentiate between free women (who veiled) and enslaved women (who did not).' (2015: 39)

This ancient relationship between clothedness, nakedness, and social hierarchy, survives with all its force to this day. It is the dichotomy between the clothed (disembodied) God (or the 'fully human') and the naked 'animal'[282]. This metaphysical/theological framework, essentially shared by Islam and Christian/post-Christian humanism, makes it *very* difficult to choose nakedness over clothedness.

Reflecting on her experience and her decision to veil as a young woman in her twenties, Eltahawy explains her choice of veiling as an internalized desire to belong. She rationalized it through feminist discourse to make it compatible with her desire to identify as a feminist (2015: 57). She stopped veiling when she realized she did not want a traditional life and a traditional marriage in Egypt and began to feel like an outsider in her own country (2015: 57). Similarly, my own rejection of the norm of clothedness is inseparable from a feeling of not-belonging, *not wanting* to belong. If I wanted to belong to the society in which I happen to exist, I would not be openly challenging its *taboo* of nudity. One must not care one bit about belonging to a society, to disobey its fundamental social norms.

Most people rationalize their choice of clothedness without any reference to ideas of belonging. In Chapter 5, it was noted that in today's England clothedness is justified on the basis of being 'safer'. Nakedness is seen as dangerous, with naked women being vulnerable to sexual assaults by men and naked men being seen as a danger to clothed women. This

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[282] See Chapter 3.

association of nakedness and sexual assaults/dangers is a major reason why Muslim women also veil. Dressing modestly is supposedly a way to protect women from male violence. The absurdity of this reasoning becomes evident when one observes the prevalence of sexual violence across the Arab world, precisely where they cover up the most. Eltahawy notes that 'almost 100% of Egyptian girls and women report being sexual harassed' (2015: 76). In Yemen, according to a study by activist Amal Basha, the situation is similar – and

'It is worth noting that nearly all women in Yemen are covered head to toe.' (2015: 77)

(It is perhaps also worth noting that Yemenite and Egyptian men who routinely harass women in public are always fully covered as well).

Women who have internalized the prohibition of nudity often argue that nakedness will not be an option for them until men stop harassing women. However, Eltahawy notes that men's behaviour is itself a product of societal attitudes towards the body and sexuality (2015: 207). The sexual violence and harassment suffered by women from men have its origins in the 'special' value that the female body acquires *because* of its prohibition/separation/sacredness, and in the shame and guilt men are taught to feel about their own bodies and sexuality. Thus, Eltahawy agrees with bell hooks[283] that liberation requires that men *and* women, *together*, reject their societies' ideas and customs regarding bodies and sexuality. Clothes and veils, under the pretext of 'protecting' women from men, enact a separation of the world that disconnects people from their bodies:

'the hijab had been my way of trying to hide from men, but in the end it had only hidden my body from myself' (2015: 59).

Like bell hooks, Eltahawy sees this separation as the *cause* of our problems and unhealthy attitudes around bodies and sexuality – not a 'necessary' solution to an unfortunate situation. Liberation requires that men and women, *together*, learn to disobey and transgress the

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[283] See 5.5 and 5.6 above.

societal/religious norms they have internalized and reject the separation of their bodies. Eltahawy urges women to rebel and disobey:

> 'To be "out of touch" with a society in which women have internalized their subjugation is an admirable thing'. (2015: 189)

Eltahawy urges men to rebel and disobey as well. Echoing bell hooks, she notes that, although they do not talk about it as much,

> 'men also struggled against sexual guilt and a socialization that produced a warped and unhealthy attitude towards women and sex' (2015: 207).

She calls for an attitude of 'extremism' – 'Extremism hits a repressive society where it hurts most' (ibid.). But she is also aware of the high price of such a rebellion:

> 'To choose to rebel, to disobey, comes at a great cost (not least social) that not everybody is able to pay.' (2015: 162)

In order to reject the Egyptian modesty standards, Eltahawhy left Egypt and now lives in the (*relatively* more liberal) U.S.

Fellow Egyptian Aliaa Elmahdy was an art student when, during the 2011 uprising, she posted images of her naked body on her online blog, 'A Rebel's Diary', as a challenge to the religious separations of public/private and sacred/profane. Her challenge to the social and religious order was met with fury from all camps (Karakuş, 2020). Feminists, in particular, accused her of reinforcing the

> 'pernicious toxic Western aesthetic codes of man as surveyor/subject and woman as surveyed/object of the gaze' (ibid.).

Elmahdy was forced to flee Egypt and was granted asylum in Sweden, where she began collaborating with Femen. Egyptian feminists then accused her of supporting Femen's 'racist colonial feminism' (ibid.).

Like the women, the few men who openly defy the modesty norms in their societies also face significant consequences: social exclusion, bullying, and loss of social and economic power. This is reminiscent of what occurs in England (see Chapter 5) – those within the community see such reactions as justified in safeguarding their community from potential dangers, a welcome defence of the established order. Most people align themselves with the established order, against the rebels. Therefore, the disruption caused by the rebels is largely non-consensual, unwelcome, and seen as threatening and immoral ('indecent') – many would argue it is 'unethical' and 'violent'.

Muslim women have the option to seek refuge in *relatively* more liberal Christian/post-Christian societies. But where can one go to escape altogether the body-negativity and criminalization of nudity of the Abrahamic world? Could traces of pre-Christian and pre-Islamic nudity-friendly lifestyles remain in societies where the colonial imposition of the religions of disembodiment – Christianity and Islam – is more recent – perhaps in Sub-Saharan Africa? Unfortunately, no – as I will discuss in the next section with reference to the Nigerian situation.

10. Christian modesty and coloniality from British India to contemporary Nigeria

There are significant similarities between the prohibition of nudity in the Christian/post-Christian West and the Islamic world. While the prohibition of nudity intersects with local power dynamics, in different societies and contexts, ultimately it is *essentially* the *same* prohibition on nudity, that both Christianity and Islam are built upon. Western clothing and Islamic veils share a parallel history, common meanings, and those who challenge the societal expectations to wear them face comparable obstacles. Definitions of 'nudity' vary, but 'nudity' is similarly forbidden. The separation between the soul and the body – between

the disembodied 'human' and the embodied, soul-less 'animal' – forms the basis of all Abrahamic religions and the cultures that have evolved from them.

I noted in Chapter 3 that forced clothedness has been forced upon people worldwide by Christian colonizers in the name of 'decency' and 'modesty' (and, to a *much* lesser extent, by Muslim rulers, with similar justifications). There appears to be a correlation between the recentness of Christian colonization and the strength of attachment to clothing among the colonized people. For example, Indians were forcefully clothed only in the 19th century (see 3.8 above), and yet today India is among the countries where the 'modesty cult' is strongest (Bateman, 2023: 3). Ranya[284], an Indian woman I met at a naturist event where was filming a documentary about us naturists, shared that in her culture it is unthinkable to be socially naked. She was unaware of naturist resorts in India, nor did she know any naturists back home.

In addition to the Indian sub-continent, Christian colonialism has also shaped popular attitudes towards the body in Sub-Saharan African societies. Christian colonizers have introduced clothing restrictions and sexualized the naked body, replicating the metaphysical/societal order of Western societies. This has resulted in the emergence of fears and feelings of danger that reinforce the prohibition of nudity.

Nigeria, like India, was a former British colony, where clothing was forcibly imposed on locals. Like India, Nigeria also became a colony in the 19th century after Christian missionaries had laid the groundwork in the late 18th century. Bibi Bakare-Yusuf, an academic, writer, and editor of *Cassava Republic Press* – a publishing house devoted to the cause of amplifying little-heard African voices – has explored the contrast between pre-colonial customs in what is now called Nigeria and the laws and public discourse around nudity in present-day, colonial Nigeria. In 2008, a new law was introduced in Nigeria criminalizing nudity: *A Bill for an Act to prohibit and punish public nudity, sexual intimidation and other related offences in Nigeria*:

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[284] Names changed for anonymity.

'In the Bill, public nudity is defined as a "state of indecent dressing which expose in the public or in the open" the breast, belly, waist and lap of a female above the age of 14 years, as well as any part of the body from two inches below the shoulders downwards to the knee. For men, indecent dressing is classified as any exposure of the male aged 14 years and above from the waist to the knee' (Bakare-Yusuf, 2011: 3).

Aside from the usual double standards applied to men and women[285], Bakare-Yusuf draws the attention to the reasoning employed to justify the need for an increased criminalization of 'nudity' (however defined). She quotes a speech given by Senator Eme Ufot Ekaette in the Nigerian parliament, where Ekaette supports the new Bill. In her intervention, Ekaette argues that the increased criminalization of nudity is necessary as part of

'the project for the RESTORATION OF HUMAN DIGNITY[286]' (in Bakare-Yusuf, 2011: 5).

This resonates with my discussion in Chapter 3: nudity implies animality, whereas human dignity requires that bodies are concealed. The imposition by the State of clothing mandates is thus reframed as 'the restoration of dignity' onto a people whose humanity would otherwise be uncertain.

Ekaette also resorts to the same arguments about the 'sexual dangers' of nudity to which we are accustomed in the West. Ekaette argues that, unless harsher laws are enacted against public nudity,

'we would be forced to all wear iron jeans trousers with padlocked belts to avoid being raped or sexually assaulted. God forbid!' (ibid.)

As usual, enforced clothedness is justified on the basis that, if people were allowed to be naked, rape and sexual violence would be rampant. Ekaette of course ignores the glaring fact

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[285] Which are normal in both Christianity and Islam.
[286] Capitalized in the original text.

that the prohibition of the naked body in Christianity and Islam has sexualized the body and is *positively* correlated with increases in sexual harassment.

Bakare-Yusuf notes that not only is this approach to public nudity wrong, but it also erases the experience of pre-colonial Nigerian cultures, where public nudity was normal and non-sexualized:

> 'The unclothed body which in many Nigerian cultures was previously read in a nonsexual way is now overburdened with sexual meaning and anxiety that acts as a prelude to sexual intercourse. This new meaning is part of a pattern of culturally and historically shifting ideas about shame inherited from the two colonising religions – Islam and Christianity' (2011: 11).

Bakare-Yusuf highlights that sexual harassment as we are familiar with it in the West and in Islam became a problem in Nigeria only following the prohibition of the naked body and its sexualization. The obvious solution, Bakare-Yusuf suggests, would be to reject the Christian and Islamic ideas about the body, to decolonize it, and re-normalize nudity.

11. Decolonizing the naked body: some problems

Unfortunately, such a project of decolonization and normalization of the naked body is arduous. The main obstacle is the visceral opposition of *most* colonized people, who have been socialized into feelings of fear, danger, and shame around nudity and sexuality, and who therefore see enforced clothedness as a necessary protection. Bakare-Yusuf notes that many contemporary Nigerians oppose public nudity. Like most people in Western and Islamic societies, most Nigerians refuse to question the relationship between the prohibition of nudity, the sexualization of the naked body, and the violent attitudes people have towards their own and others' bodies. Bakare-Yusuf notes that:

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'The most insidious forms of power in society operate via the silent internalisation of its strictures by the victims themselves: the ressentiment of the oppressed as Nietzsche might have put it.' (2011: 17)

Many women endorse the prohibition of nudity in the name of feminism. Like Eltahawy in her twenties and like many Western women and liberal commentators[287], Nigerian 'feminist' philosopher Ogochukwu Agatha Okpokwasili focusses on the link between nudity and rape:

'unclad and scantily dressed females have triggered the sexual urge of men in our society. Their libido is going haywire. This primal urge has resulted in so many occasions [in] rape.' (2021: 165).

According to this viewpoint, repeated exposure to female nudity over-excites males and reinforces their instincts as sexual predators:

'Men faced with the sight of naked flesh of women in the society on a daily basis, are becoming more sexually aggressive as they want to conquer and dominate at all costs' (2021: 164)

Okpokwasili believes that men's predatory sexuality is the problem. In agreement with the dominant Western discourse, she argues that forced clothedness serves to tame males' aggressive instincts:

'Society should do all they can to discourage naked bodies of women on public display. It should be banned in whatever shape or form.' (2021: 158).

Under the banner of 'feminism', this perspective promotes a conservative religious morality which, quite possibly, harms both women and men. It also stifles the exploration of alternative arrangements which could potentially be more beneficial. In the following section, I explore the views of nudist activist and economist Victoria Bateman, who suggests that for

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[287] See Chapter 5.

many women, 'feminism' can serve as a smokescreen for unchallenged, internalized puritanical beliefs and a continued pursuit of power games.

12. Victoria Bateman's Naked Feminism

I mentioned Bateman in the previous chapter. An economist from Cambridge University, she is one of the extremely rare Western figures to have been publicly protesting against what she calls 'the cult of female modesty'. She has appeared naked on television and at academic events. In *Naked Feminism: Breaking the Cult of Female Modesty* (2023), she says that her protests against the prohibition of nudity have attracted furious reactions, particularly from other women and in the name of 'feminism'. Throughout her activism, she has found herself largely unsupported and alone.

Echoing Eltahawy (2015), bell hooks (2005), and Bakare-Yusuf (2011), Bateman criticizes 'puritanical feminists' for their inability to reject oppressive belief systems (2023: 161ff.). Wanting to identify as 'feminist', many women endorse conservative or reactionary social values because these are sold to them as 'protecting women from men'. Similarly to hooks and Eltahawy, Bateman believes the problem lies in a flawed understanding of feminism as a power struggle between women and men. This perspective suggests that women can only achieve liberation by subjugating men. As Okpokwasili points out, this subjugation is primarily sexual, where men's sexuality must be controlled and repressed. Only after men's sexuality is repressed – hence the public space becomes 'safe' – can women free their bodies and sexualities from their current self-imposed imprisonment. Along these same lines, suffragette Christabel Pankhurst famously demanded: '*Votes for women; Chastity for Men*'.

It is quite clear that, beyond the guise of 'feminism', this perspective aligns with Victorian and Christian puritanism. The issue is that these puritanical beliefs have endured and persist in much of contemporary feminism:

> 'Victorian feminists promoted purity of body and spirit and, as we will see, they bear a striking resemblance to today's radical feminists' (2023: 162).

Bateman explores various reasons why most feminists embrace modesty culture and argue that bodily and sexual emancipation is impossible until men's 'sexual instincts' are active (2023: 163ff.). First, she considers and dismisses the notion that women 'have little choice but to abide' by modesty culture. She finds it hard to believe, she given that women make up half of the world's population – if they *truly* desired to reject modesty and rebel against it, they could easily do so. She then ponders the possibility that women may have been socialized into modesty culture and have internalized it to the point where they do not see it as oppressive (as Bakare-Yusuf suggests). Bateman, however, is skeptical of this perspective and suggests that many women *consciously* and *reflectively* suppress their bodies and sexuality (ibid.).

Finally, she considers the idea that modesty culture may be 'in women's collective interest' (2023: 168). As an economist, Bateman argues that social exchange models support this viewpoint:

> 'When women are locked out of education, work, and politics, it can be in women's collective interest to restrict the supply of sex so as to achieve a higher 'price' for the one thing they do have to offer' (2023: 205).

However, modesty is a relative good:

> 'to get the best outcome for yourself, you have to outdo other women in terms of modesty, pointing out where you are doing better, and where they have 'fallen'. Modesty is a relative thing; for one woman to be modest, another must be deemed immodest' (2023: 206)

If this is right, modesty underscores power games that women play against each other. Even in relation to men, modesty is weaponized by females in their own power struggles to enhance their social and sexual value.

'In other words, modesty is not necessarily enforced by sisterhood in order to 'protect' one another, it can also be the outcome of intra-female competition' (2023: 206)

Reminiscing about her own participation in the 'modesty cult' in her youth, Bateman now observes that her modesty allowed her not only to avoid judgments but also to judge others:

'I was myself complicit in society's attempt to divide women up into good girls and whores' (2023: 5)

I started this work from Foucault, who urges us to acknowledge the power games we play, and to minimize domination. He gestures towards a 'posthumanist' freedom: because humanist discourses around freedom often conceal games of power[288]. The power games that women play among themselves through their body politics and in the name of modesty explain the fact that, although the relationship between sexual repression and women's subordination has long been noted (already by the Saint-Simoniennes!), *most* feminists have consistently embraced puritanical values:

'When it comes to the persistence of the modesty cult, feminism needs to take its fair share of the blame' (2023: 169)

In fact,

'immodest women are to the feminist movement what scabs are to the trade union movement' (2023: 205)

To be sure, women's collective defence of modesty culture – especially in liberal and radical circles – is usually dressed up in anti-men or anti-colonial arguments. For example, Bateman quotes U.S feminist Gabby Aossey, who argues that while

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[288] See Chapter 1.

'women who wear hijab have freed themselves from a man's and society's judgmental gaze, the Free the Nipplers have not… they have fallen deep into man's world' (2023: 194).

In colonial settings, anti-men justifications are often replaced by anti-colonial ones. Bateman recounts being attacked by feminists saying things like

'as a Middle Eastern woman, I find nudity oppressive and signifies Western intrusion' (2023: 193).

In all these cases, the struggle for freedom and emancipation is turned upside down – constructed as 'further oppression', and thus vehemently opposed by the very people one would think should be allied in the struggle.

Bateman urges women to 'escape from the modesty cult' – to reject internalized religious/ideological values and to refrain from playing more power games. Echoing Foucault, she believes that, as people exert less domination over others, freedom increases for everyone – for freedom is not a zero-sum game:

'Challenge the cult of female modesty and you challenge a system of beliefs that hampers the freedom and happiness of every woman' (2023: 212)

Bateman quotes Ugandan feminist Tricia Twasiima:

'By freeing ourselves from the limits of what is acceptable, we give room to new ways of resisting and ultimately new ways of liberation. I would challenge us to begin to reimagine what this freedom truly looks like. One of the ways to do this is by reclaiming our bodies and determining for ourselves what we will use them for. This of course is difficult considering the consequences dealt to those who reject set standards, but perhaps we can begin by unlearning our own biases and internalisations about our bodies.' (Twasiima, 2019)

Twasiima's suggestion that we 'free ourselves from the limits of what is acceptable', that 'we give room to new ways of resisting and ultimately new ways of liberation', aligns with the goal I had in mind at the beginning of this project, which I called, with Foucault, 'posthumanist freedom'. However, of course, there are consequences for those who reject these standards – something I expected, as my own experience confirms. The crucial question I asked at the start of this project, which I must ask again now, is whether we can live with these consequences – or are they too severe?

Another issue, which I identified at the beginning of this chapter and must address now, is my loneliness as a *man* seeking to challenge the cult of (male) modesty. While women have an established discourse, even if minoritarian, to rely on, I do not feel I have one. Many readers may criticize my approach in these pages by claiming that I have sought an alliance with women, some even brown or black (!), despite being a 'privileged white cis-man'. I believe that my attempt to reject societal modesty culture and embrace/normalize nudity significantly aligns with Eltahawy's and Bateman's views – but I am aware that many women will react angrily to what they may perceive as 'my failure to appreciate the fundamental difference between the experience of having a female vs. male body'. Against my criticism of women who, in the name of 'feminism', endorse puritanical beliefs that harm and oppress everyone, many will argue that as a man, I have no right to participate in such discussions[289].

I see such angry reactions to my attempts to align my struggle with other already-established ones as yet more evidence of my loneliness. My voice is not heard, and my arguments are unintelligible. I am told that if I want to be heard and understood, I must accept the discursive framework of the world I exist in – the very thing I reject. And so, I find myself alone in my attempt to free myself from the limits of what is considered acceptable. The absence of an established discourse and allies supporting my struggle for (posthumanist) freedom *as a man* means that my only option may be to go it alone. Maybe I should stop trying to be understood by a society that for the most part is incapable and unwilling to break free from its ideological

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[289] Many women see modesty culture as imposed on them by men, which may make my suggestion offensive and insulting. While I find this perspective misguided and reactionary, I won't argue against it or belittle it.

prison. Perhaps I should abandon any hope of freeing my body while retaining membership in my society – perhaps I should consider unilateral ('violent') rebellion.

13. Clothedness as coloniality, nudity as violent rebellion

My reflections suggest that practices that disobey established religious norms are seen as 'unethical' by most people. This is especially true for clothedness, given its fundamental role in humanist[290] societies. By publicly embracing and exposing my naked body, I set myself apart from the moral community. I not only face isolation, but also rage. It is pointless to try to defend the ethical value of my actions in front of the conforming mob – their visceral, affective reactions can be dangerous. I have no clear allies. Although there are discourses that could and should support my struggle, most people do not see them as relevant. Whether I am perceived as an 'animal', a 'criminal', a 'pervert', or as a 'privileged white cis-male', there is no consensual way forward for me to explore freedom from the limits of what is acceptable, when it comes to nudity. I must consider alternative approaches.

I conclude this chapter suggesting conceiving of my quest for freedom beyond the constraints of our clothed order as an anti-colonial rebellion. While the case for such an approach may be clearer in relation to recently-colonized peoples and societies, such as those in Africa, a similar perspective could be perhaps also applied to Christianity's colonization of ancient Europe (as in Nietzsche's argument that both the Roman empire and the peoples living beyond its borders 'succumbed to the priestly people'; GM I:16).

South African psychosocial theorist Mpho Mathebula is one of the writers who argue for nakedness as a rejection of Christian and Muslim coloniality. In *Nakedness as Decolonial Praxis*, she highlights that public nudity was normal across sub-Saharan Africa before the European colonization[291]. According to Mathebula, the very notion of 'indecency' itself is deeply rooted in colonial (Christian and Islamic) perspectives. Challenging colonial

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[290] Abrahamic.
[291] She supports her claims with a thorough review of African literature, just in case someone may still have doubts about this – such as my PhD colleagues (see Chapter 5).

narratives that promise respectability 'by insisting that being fully clothed indexed African modernity', she points to naked bodies as agents of rebellion:

'the naked body speaks the language of spectacle, rebellion and subversion' (2021: 8).

Rejecting conservative approaches that subordinate disrupting coloniality to a prior change in people's (especially men's) attitudes, Mathebula argues that disrupting coloniality in its everyday material practices must be the *starting point* towards a more widespread change in people's thinking. People must be forced to confront the bodies they refuse to see, and thus appreciate their own complicity in colonial constructions:

'Agential naked body protests disrupt coloniality and religious tropes of shameful and sinful bodies. Since, coloniality portrays black women's bodies as grotesque, uncivilised and crudely sexual, even when they are formally dressed, naked protest turns these crude stereotypes into a mockery and subverts the lens. The observer is forced to confront their own complicity in colonial constructions of the body.' (2021: 8).

Mathebula suggests that the colonial subject – the human who conceals their body under their clothes – may be forced to confront its dual identity (colonizer/colonized) and perhaps let go of their identification with the colonial human to rediscover their bodily, inhuman selves. Mathebula recounts a naked protest by South African women in Soweto in 1990 as evidence that it is possible to transform the body from a site of oppression into a site of empowerment and defiance, against the 'humans' who oppress it. She interviews those who took part, and who unanimously reported a feeling of empowerment in embracing their naked bodies against the clothed 'humans' in power. In the words of one of them, Thabisa:

'At the time when I was naked, I felt so powerful ... the power to even hit a policeman' (2021: 21).

The naked protest Mathebula talks about is one among many. In *Bodies that Matter*, Nigerian educator Maryam Kazeem urges us to remember that the submission/colonization of bodies

across Sub-Saharan African societies by Christian disembodied 'persons' – and the imposition of a clothed sense of humanity – sparked a large number of naked protests throughout the 20th century – for example in Nigeria, Liberia, Kenya, and Uganda (in Bateman, 2023: 193).

In Sub-Saharan African societies it is easier to see the connection between clothedness and coloniality, because relatively little time has passed since bodies could still exist free and without shame. In Europe, bodies have been shamed and forced to live clandestinely for some 2,000 years[292]. No trace is left of what had been possible before. And yet, what Christian colonizers have done to those who were living *with their bodies* in Sub-Saharan Africa might be similar to what early Christians did to the ancient Europeans, who also did not know body shame and were untroubled by their naked bodies.

The question[293] is whether I, as a 21st century European, could try to decolonize myself and dis-identify with my 'human' soul, which I understand as the site of colonial oppression. If I could dis-identify with my soul and embrace the rebellious project of decolonizing my body, I would also make sense of my isolation and the rage responses I encounter. I would probably stop seeking a peaceful, consensual way forward with the colonized people among whom I live, for their defence of the established order is ultimately a defence of the Christian colonial order. If I could experience my world in such terms, I would perhaps see violence as the only way to challenge the order.

In *Wretched of the Earth*, Frantz Fanon discusses the ethics and practice of decolonization. Fanon's problem is: how to change the established order of the world?

> 'Decolonization, which sets out to change the order of the world, is clearly an agenda for total disorder. But it cannot be accomplished by the wave of a magic wand, a natural cataclysm, or a gentleman's agreement' (2001: 2).

The order can only be challenged 'by out and out violence':

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[292] See Chapter 2.
[293] Which deserves further discussion, well beyond the scope of this work.

'You do not disorganize a society, however primitive it may be, with such an agenda if you are not determined from the very start to smash any obstacle encountered… [The world of the colonized] can only be challenged by out and out violence.' (2001: 3)

I think Fanon is right: disorganizing and subverting the clothed, humanist order of our modern Western world requires 'out and out violence'. However, the personal cost of embarking on a violent and hopelessly-minoritarian rebellion against the clothed, humanist order of the West means rebelling is probably a bad idea.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I paused my naked adventuring to reflect on some ethical problems that arise when seeking to destabilize the established clothed order. My ethical practice is generally perceived by most in my society as 'unethical', non-consensual, violent, dangerous. Its potential to cause discomfort to others is considered sufficient to justify its prohibition. In the first part of the chapter, I have reflected on the accusations raised against me, and I noted that they are the typical reactions of a segregated order seeking to protect itself from challenges. I framed my struggle to free my body as a struggle against Western (male) modesty culture, which however remains largely a *taboo* subject. Notwithstanding some differences in our struggles, I sought allies in women who have been trying to reject modesty culture across various societies – and who all faced similar reactions to mine: isolation, rage, accusations of being unethical, dangerous, etc. None of their attempts has been successful, and many had to flee their countries to be safe.

Fanon tells us that a program of disorder, that seeks to change the order of the world, can only be achieved through violent means. It will never be done consensually. He is probably right, but am I prepared to pay the price? Eltahawy, who is fully aware of the obstacles she faces from a conservative society that largely disagrees with her, says she is not afraid of confrontation:

'it is the job of revolutions to shock, to provoke, and to upset, not to behave or to be polite' (2015: 226)

Unfortunately, this is much easier said than done. To escape the social consequences of her 'nudity' (not wearing a headscarf), Eltahawy left Egypt for the U.S., where exposing one's hair does not count as nudity. In Britain, Steven Gough – the 'naked rambler' – spent almost a decade in prison for refusing to wear clothes and became an object of ridicule[294]. I cannot move to a country where I can be normally naked, and I do not want to suffer what Steven Gough did. What should I do?

Perhaps, the wisest course of action is to abandon the whole enterprise of critical theory as envisioned by Kant and to unreflectively endorse the beliefs of our community – to quietly conform.

Or I could retreat into social bubbles with people who share my views and values. Rather than struggling to introduce my naked body in the normal world, where it is clearly unwelcome, I could just retreat to naturist spaces. In the next chapter, I discuss my experience of naturism. I assess whether naturism helps to challenge the clandestinity of the flesh – and the broader problem of whether the solution to the problem of posthumanist freedom and of experimenting with difference requires finding the appropriate niche subculture and carving an underground existence in the belly of a hopelessly conformist society.

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[294] See Chapter 2.

Chapter 7: Naturism: rise and fall of a dream

'The universal or widespread practice of nudity would involve the obliteration to a large extent of class and caste distinctions' (Parmelee, 1941: 13)

Introduction

Throughout the chapters above, I have been exploring problems that arise when trying to challenge my society's 'obvious' norms. Challenging societal norm doesn't necessarily come from disagreeing with them; I believe that exploring the possibility of (and the obstacles to) a *practical* critique of the norm is a precondition for any meaningful critique of the existing social order. I expressed a concern that the social repercussions of such critical practice may be so harsh as to render any meaningful social criticism impossible *in practice*.

Focussing on the case of the modern Western prohibition of public nudity, I noted that the freedom to be naked in England is even enshrined in law[295]. However, I have painfully experienced that the theoretical lawfulness of public nudity is irrelevant in the face of social forces that violently enforce a traditional, religious/cultural prohibition of nudity. These forces are at play across social spaces and social groups – among animals and criminals locked up in our prisons, in everyday public spaces, and even among the educated classes in supposedly-radical university departments. Regardless of the ideological banners though which people identify themselves, the dominant discursive ideological constructions foreclose any avenue to meaningfully challenge the established order. Perhaps, it is impossible to disobey our (implicit) societal prohibition of nudity without incurring serious

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[295] See Appendix A.

adverse consequences. Perhaps, the Foucauldian ideal of ethics as 'reflective practice of freedom' is delusionary, and quiet compliance with 'herd morality' the only sensible option.

Such realizations suggested to me that I pause my adventures and explorations of naked living in a clothed world to reflect on how to proceed. In the previous chapter, I have concluded that, when it comes to nudity, consensual non-conformity is unattainable. Non-consensual rebellion is probably my preferred ethical choice, but I am afraid the price might be more than I am willing to pay. What else can I do?

In this chapter, I consider another possible course of action. Perhaps, even though I cannot re-enact Diogenes the Cynic's critical practice of nudity in my everyday British society, there may be other ways to experiment with nude living. There remains the option of retreating to segregated 'naturist' (or 'nudist') spaces, where, among fellow naturists, nudity becomes the new norm. In other words: although individuals cannot reject their societies' norms, they *can* retreat into smaller communities of like-minded individuals who are defined by their shared rejection of particular social norms. There exist many naturist communities, both in Britain and worldwide. The International Naturist Federation defines 'naturism' as

> 'a way of life in harmony with nature characterised by the practice of communal nudity with the intention of encouraging self-respect, respect for others and for the environment'[296]

This chapter discusses the practice of naturism – or of 'nudism': I use the two terms interchangeably – and naturist spaces. Are they useful in challenging the separation and clandestinity of my body?

In Chapter 2, I shared my first experience with naturism. I was in my early 20s, still at university, and my friend Anna took me on a naturist holiday to Croatia. We travelled along the Croatian coast, exploring naturist campsites along the way. I found it incredibly liberating, at the time. Being naked in a social and public space, surrounded by other naked

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[296] Available online at https://downloads.inf-fni.org/download/51/english/133/definition-of-naturism-1974.pdf

people, and experiencing the extraordinary friendliness and sense of community among naturists, opened my eyes to possibilities I didn't know existed.

After that initial experience, I started seeking out naturist spaces whenever possible. I visited naturist beaches, campsites, country clubs, hotels and resorts, in both Europe and America. As a master's student at Birkbeck, University of London, I founded a naturist student society and organized a number of naked social events on campus. I also helped run naked swim sessions at the University of London Union pool. I attended different naturist events: from disco nights to picnics, festivals, and bike rides. In California, my wife and I even managed our own clothing-optional guesthouse.

However, over time, much of the initial enthusiasm that twenty years ago led me to embrace naturism wholeheartedly has faded. I still enjoy the freedom to be socially naked that naturist spaces provide, but I have become increasingly concerned about the limitations and inherent problems of naturism.

Naturism's popularity in the West has declined since the heydays of the 1970s. In England, where I live, naturism is primarily practised by older white men. Membership in naturist organizations continues to decrease as older naturists who pass away are not replaced by younger ones[297]. British Naturism, the main organization in the UK, has recorded declining membership in 19 out of the past 20 years[298]. Similarly, the two main naturist organizations in the U.S., the American Association for Nude Recreation (AANR) and The Naturist Society (TNS) have seen a 50% and 80% decline in membership respectively[299]. Even in Germany, where naturism (*Freikörperkultur*) was once thriving, the practice is now dying out[300]. Despite these trends, I still wonder if naturism is 'better than nothing', considering the practical impossibility of embracing nudity in everyday life within our clothed society.

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[297] In October 2022, in Britain, the press reported of a survey according to which 14% of the British population consider themselves to be 'naturists' or 'nudists'. However, the survey defines 'naturists' or 'nudists' those who had swum or sunbathed naked at least one in their lives, which is obviously wrong. (https://www.ipsos.com/en-uk/14-percent-surveyed-describe-themselves-as-naturists-or-nudists#:~:text=An%20Ipsos%20survey%20recently%20commissioned,swum%20without%20a%20costume%20before.).
298 https://www.pressreader.com/uk/the-sunday-telegraph/20181014/281814284827546.
299 https://naturistplace.substack.com/p/how-serious-has-us-naturisms-decline.
300 https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2019/aug/08/the-naked-truth-is-naturism-dying-out-in-germany.

Perhaps naturism could be an intermediate step towards normalizing nudity in everyday life in the future.

To answer these questions, I begin this chapter with a historical introduction to naturism (sections 1-2). I discuss the popularity of naturism in East Germany and also some of its problems (sections 3-4). I then suggest that a major problem with naturism lies in its Christian, sex-negative roots (section 5). Unfortunately, important experiments with sex-positive 'naturism' have resulted in other problems (sections 6-7). In the second half of the chapter, I consider naturist events that take place *within* 'normal' public spaces, such as the World Naked Bike Rides (section 8). World Naked Bike Rides are less separate and more inclusive, and thus help to overcome some of the problems of traditional naturism (section 9). However, by being less removed from the normal world, they may elicit reactions similar to those discussed in Chapter 5 (sections 10-11). Ultimately, I reject the suggestion of naturism as an exciting way forward.

1. A brief history of naturism: the beginnings

The first mention of naturism in the modern sense of the word is perhaps found for the first time in the work of Jean Baptiste Luc Planchon, author of *Le naturisme, ou la nature considérée dans les maladies et leur traitement conforme à la doctrine et à la pratique d'Hippocrate et de ses sectateurs* (1778). As urbanization driven by the industrial revolution hastened people's separation from nature, and stricter moral rules took hold that made nudity *even more* prohibited – physically, sexually, morally 'dangerous' – than it had been in the previous centuries, there also grew voices that called for closer contact of people's bodies with nature. To live one's life under clothes that starved bodies of fresh air and sunlight was not just silly: it was unhealthy, many claimed.

Over the course of the 19th century, industrialization and urbanization in Europe continued at an ever-increasing pace – along with most people's disconnection from nature, sunlight, and fresh air. In this context, nudist health practices and, later, social movements were born that promoted the benefits of spending time naked in nature. The practice of nudity was seen as a

'rational and scientific corrective' to the medical, social, psychological, and spiritual problems caused by modern urban living in industrialized Europe (Barcan, 2004b: 9). Thus, naturism began as 'heliotherapy', or 'phototherapy' – as a health practice. In 1853, Swiss doctor Arnold Rikli founded a *Sonnenheilanstalt* (solar sanatorium) in the town of Bled (Slovenia). In 1903, Faroese physician Niels Finsen won the Nobel Prize for his work on the benefits of light on the skin, particularly his *On the Effects of Light on the Skin* (1893). By 1906, Germany alone had 105 air-bath sanatoriums. Similar views gained traction across Europe. In England, physician Caleb Saleeby believed clothes to be an unnatural barrier between the human body and its life source (*Sunlight and Health*, 1923). He went on to establish *The Sunlight League*, which unofficially promoted nudist practices. In France, brothers and physicians Gaston and André Durville argued for the positive effects on well-being of exposing the body to the natural environment – 'naturism'.

The first naturist association was founded in Essen, Germany, in 1893 (Dressen, 2020). In 1899 students from Steglitz, Germany, founded the *Wandervögel* nude hiking and bathing club, which soon included women too. In 1900 in Ascona, Switzerland, a group of 'artists, writers, philosophers, and other dropouts' (ibid.), led by Belgian Henri Oedekoven and Austrian pianist Ida Hoffman established what is perhaps the first modern nudist community. In 1903 Paul Zimmermann established the *Freilicht Klingberg* naturist holiday camp. The first official nudist beach was established on the island of Sylt, Germany, in 1920. Nudism quickly gained popularity along the German coast and particularly among intellectuals in 'the liberal, adventurous Berlin' (Rusch, 2010):

> 'German *Nacktkultur* was "an invention of the big city" (Toepfer 1997: 33), of little interest to those who already lived in the country.' (Barcan, 2004b: 6)

Thus, a split developed between urban and liberal intellectuals, who embraced nudism, and conservative circles that not only saw no need for it but also considered nudist practices immoral and 'dangerous'.

2. Naturism as radical political practice

Nudism was quickly and enthusiastically embraced by socialists and radicals who highlighted the egalitarian aspect of nudity, especially in the years after the First World War. In 1921, in Berlin, Adolf Koch founded the *Körperkulturschule*, a socialist naturist group – the term *Freikörperkultur* was also coined. Sociologist and naturist Maurice Parmelee writes:

> 'The universal or widespread practice of nudity would involve the obliteration to a large extent of class and caste distinctions' (1941: 13).

In a similar vein, socialist writer Ennemond Boniface says:

> 'Workers have only two options: bloody revolution or naturism' (in Barcan, 2004a: 168).

Pastor Henry Huchet saw nudism as the answer to all social antagonisms:

> 'Nudism is universal fraternity. It is the end of all wars!' (in Barcan, 2004b: 16).

For the radical thinkers who became early proponents of nudism, nudity was the answer not only to class antagonisms but also to gender separations and divisions. Although most of the early advocates for nudism were male, many women also joined the movement and campaigned for it. In the early 1900's, female physician Bess Mensendieck argued for the practice of nudism as a way to enhance women's self-esteem (Barcan, 2004b: 5). Parmelee notes that the habit of concealing the body

> 'gives rise to unhealthy mental complexes, and creates abnormal relations between the sexes' (ibid.)

Thus, he argued that nudism is

'a powerful aid to feminism, because it abolishes the artificial and unnecessary sex
barriers and distinction of dress' (ibid.)

For Parmelee, the nudist movement

'is indeed the logical continuation and consummation of the women's movement, for
it at last brings woman into the man's world and man into the woman's world, so that
they can see each other as they really are.' (Parmelee 1941: 75).

The effectiveness of the practice of nudity in helping people appreciate the artificial nature of
social distinctions and hierarchies did not sit well with those who sought to maintain social
distinctions and hierarchies. Whereas nudity was enthusiastically endorsed by liberal urban
intellectuals, the aristocracy and the upper classes never embraced nudism to any significant
extent (Barcan, 2004b: 15). When the Nazis came to power in Germany, they immediately
outlawed the practice of naturism. On 3 March 1933, Hermann Göring established that:

'One of the greatest dangers for German culture and morality is the so-called nudity
movement… Among women the nudity kills natural modesty; it takes from men their
respect for women, and thereby destroys the prerequisite for any genuine culture. It is
therefore expected of all police authorities that, in support of the spiritual powers
developed through the national movement, they take all police measures to destroy
the so-called nude culture.'[301]

On Nazi orders, naturist publications were destroyed. The idea that 'among women nudity
kills natural modesty' and takes away their respect is a thoroughly Christian one[302] – Pope
Pius XI enthusiastically approved:

'The pagan tendencies in present-day life afflict all open and attentive eyes. For many
people, life is specifically and paganly given over only to pleasure, to the quest after
pleasure and to amusement that is specifically and paganly immodest, with an

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[301] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Freik%C3%B6rperkultur#cite_note-DW1-1.
[302] See in particular Chapters 3 and 6 above.

immodesty that often exceeds that of ancient pagan life, inasmuch as it is addicted to what is termed, with a horrible word and horrible blasphemy, the practice and cult of nudity.'[303]

However, Göring's efforts were only partially successful. The great popularity of naturism among the German people meant that unofficial nude bathing continued and was ultimately tolerated by the Nazis[304].

The post-war decades saw a renewed interest in naturism. Nude bathing became popular once again, particularly in central and Northern Europe and along the Yugoslavian and Southern French coasts – although generally as a recreational activity, without the political charge and meaning of earlier decades. The political valence of nudity became prominent again among hippies in the countercultural movements of the 1960s and 1970s, both in Europe and North America. For hippies and countercultural activists, nudity often represented the rejection of the existing social order, a step outside of the normal order of things. In Milan, 1976, a festival organized by the 'Proletarian Youth' was named *Nudi verso la Follia* (Naked towards Folly), and participants were encouraged to be naked. Yet, nudity as a radical political practice and naturism as a recreational activity, albeit one favoured mostly by the liberal and educated urban classes, were by now separate endeavours.

3. Nudism and the GDR

An interesting and well-known case is represented by the extraordinary success of naturism in post-war Communist East Germany. Josie McLellan is a social and cultural historian whose work focusses on East Germany; she has devoted particular attention to analysing the popularity of naturism among East Germans. The East German government initially opposed nudism – partly because of anxieties around the (political) dangers of allowing people to free their bodies. The resurgence of the nudist movement in West Germany meant East Germans

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[303] https://content.time.com/time/subscriber/article/0,33009,748550,00.html
[304] Nazis' a celebration of the 'beauty' of the Arian body and their use of nudity in public art meant that nudism could even, to some extent, be enlisted to their cause – for example, in the works by Leni Riefenstahl, Arno Breker, or Josef Thorak.

leaders saw it 'as an expression of imperialist decadence' (McLellan, 2007: 54) – while also incompatible with the rigid moralistic and anti-sexual stance of Cold War Communist regimes. Bodies served to work, and sensuality was anti-work. In 1954, GDR's General Inspector Seifert wrote to the Interior Minister Willi Stoph stating that the majority of nudists are

> 'not people who are interested in keeping their bodies healthy, but people who are looking for sexual satisfaction' (ibid.: 55).

However, the popularity of naturism in pre-war Germany meant that naturism was still largely accepted among the population. The argument that naturists were sexual perverts fell flat. McLellan notes that nudists were a balanced mix of men and women, which undermined the usual[305] fear-mongering discourse focussing on sexually predatory males. Furthermore, distancing themselves from the prevalent homophobia of the time, nudists presented their hobby as a heterosexual and family-oriented pastime (ibid.).

For a while, the regime kept trying to enforce its ban on naturism and portrayed its 'war on naturism' as the conflict between 'criminal' nudists and law-abiding clothed 'citizens' – or between decadent bourgeois intellectuals and morally upright proletarian workers:

> 'Echoing Nazi legislation on nude bathing that banned behavior that might "injure the healthy and natural feelings of the people [*Volksempfinden*]," the [GDR's] Ministry of the Interior described nudity as a threat to the "natural and healthy feelings of our working people".' (ibid.: 58)

However, politicians' attempts to stir class conflict and moral panic failed. Many East Germans refused to comply with the ban on nudity and even ridiculed it[306]. Eventually, it became clear that the population overwhelmingly supported nudism – including the working classes, albeit to a lesser extent. In a society where nudism was relatively common, despite

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[305] See Chapter 5, in particular.
[306] From a 1954 Rostock police report: 'After the ban had been made public, some vacationers put a tie around their necks and went swimming like that. They wanted to show that they were not swimming naked but had something on.' (in McLellan, 2007: 59).

the official ban, even non-nudists became accustomed to it and realized that there was nothing to fear. Eventually, the government recognized that waging a war on nudity was not a priority and gave up. The GDR legalized nudism in 1956, and by the late 1960s, tolerant and relaxed attitudes replaced the war on nudism.

Nudism experienced a spectacular spread in the 1970s and 1980s, becoming almost ubiquitous on East Germany's beaches. By the time of the German reunification in 1990, nudism in East Germany enjoyed unparalleled popularity. This popularity led to 'beach wars' between West Germans and East Germans bathers after the reunification. West Germans demanded clear separation between nudist beaches and textile beaches, while their Eastern counterparts were not as bothered[307]. A frequently-asked question is why nudism became so popular in East Germany, of all places. According to writer Judith Kruse,

> 'Nudism became a 'little freedom' for many, which allowed one to step out of societal roles and break out of the narrow prudishness of everyday life. Looking back, many supporters of nudism still feel today that they were able, at least temporarily and in a confined space, to realize principles that were underdeveloped or missing in GDR society: freedom and tolerance' (in ibid: 70).

Similarly, sociologist Uli Linke suggests that nudism offered East Germans a sense of freedom and relief from the uniforms, work clothes, and rigid structures of Communist everyday life:

> 'East Germans who travelled to the Baltic Sea on vacation adopted nude sunbathing and naked swimming as nonviolent means of resistance.' (1999: 72)

Whereas 'the wearing of uniforms signified participation in an organized society',

> '[i]n East Germany, public nakedness was experienced, and read, as a way of being, of projecting an authentic identity, without state intervention' (ibid.).

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[307] Alexander Ferguson, "Germany's Divide Exposed in Underpants War," *The Independent,* August 25, 1992.

However, while this is probably true, it is *also* worth considering the specific type of nudism/naturism that became popular in the GDR – the German *Freikörperkultur* (FKK). Perhaps, the *Freikörperkultur*'s turn-of-the-20th-century blend of moralistic and socialist values had always remained the core foundation of the movement. And perhaps, while this helped it to thrive in the GDR, it may also be a limitation that makes FKK incompatible with the 21st century and with those seeking, through nudity, freedom from the established norms.

4. Moralistic naturists

Moralistic or religious criticisms of naturism are common, but it is less common to critique naturism from a genuinely radical viewpoint – for being moralistic and religious in itself. Yet, this is what I believe needs to be done to explain the decline of naturism across Europe and its lack of appeal among younger generations, including the urban, educated, cosmopolitan youth of today.

In her study of GDR naturism, Josie McLellan surveyed many questionnaires from East German naturists who explained what they enjoyed about naturism. These questionnaires are preserved in the Greifswald regional archives. The responses from the naturists align with my own experience. Many respondents said that naturist campsites

> 'were an oasis of moral, social, and material order. Even two police officers sent to clamp down on a well-known nudist camping spot were forced to admit that it was cleaner than other campsites in the area.' (2007: 68).

Nudists described themselves as a 'collective', a 'community', 'one big family'. McLellan comments:

> 'again, this was a means of stressing the asexual nature of nudism. One of the most highly prized values of the nudist community was sexual self-discipline. One man praised "the necessary self-control and everybody's clean behavior" as what he liked

most about nudism. Another respondent mentioned "moral cleanliness, indecent behavior only ever in the case of novices, who are immediately taught better." Nudists, it seemed, formed a self-policing community based on shared values such as discipline, cleanliness, and (sexual) self-control.' (ibid.)

This mirrors my own experience of naturist sites, not just in the former GDR but virtually everywhere else I have been[308]. In my first experience at naturist campsites, my friend Anna and I – both beginners – did not yet know the rules and ran around naked everywhere. We were quickly reprimanded by disapproving naturists who explained the guidelines to us – that nudity is not allowed in cafés and restaurants, that we must not venture naked beyond the limits of the nudist campsite, and so on. After drinking too much wine, we felt judged by those around us. McLellan suggests that:

'In their distaste for fun-seeking, hedonistic youngsters, nudists did not depart too radically from the prevailing moral climate' (2007: 72),

And that (barely-concealed) distaste is exactly what Anna and I felt as young, drunk, naked beginners in FKK campsites.

My later experiences generally confirmed that initial impression. Some 15 years after my first naturist experiences, my girlfriend and I stayed in the (German-run) hippie community of Finca Argayall on the Canarian island of La Gomera. Their beach, swimming pool and recreational areas are FKK. The place is supposedly about freedom and living in harmony with nature – yet everywhere there are signs asking visitors to be quiet, refrain from using the pool during siesta times, always wear flip flops, turn off showers or taps, keep the place clean, and so on. We were naked, but we did not feel free; we felt controlled, and great importance was placed on moral superiority demonstrated through being quiet, clean, tidy, etc. My girlfriend and I sought freedom on nearby local beaches, where we could also be naked, but without any moral police around.

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[308] E.g., Croatia, German naturist spaces in Spain and Portugal, England, U.S.

Despite the exhilarating feeling of freedom that comes from communal nudity, the moral strictness of many naturist spaces is neither fun nor liberating. The more naturists value their community for its discipline, cleanliness, and sexual self-control, the more they exclude those who are undisciplined, 'dirty', or lacking in sexual self-control. McLellan quotes a man writing in the *Kulturbund*:

> 'Those elements that bring nudism into discredit must be dealt with ruthlessly. There are elements everywhere who cannot fit into a group.' (ibid: 71)

Naturists often imply a sense of moral superiority.

5. Naturism's Christian roots

The claims to moral superiority implicit in many naturist discourses are based on the values of 'cleanliness' and sexual self-control of the 19th and early 20th century Christian world out of which naturism was born – even in its 'radical' socialist versions, where nudity was proposed as an overcoming of social differences and hierarchies, naturism remained attached to a *Christian* vision of egalitarian utopia.

The 'cleanliness' and the sexual self-control of which naturists are so proud of are clearly reminiscent of the prelapsarian state of humanity in Christian theology[309]. It is precisely because naturists are capable of the sexual self-control that Augustine attributes to Edenic humanity – 'clean' because not yet soiled by sin, – that naturists can demand the right to be naked. Their nudity is 'innocent' just like that of Adam and Eve before the *Fall*. This theological apparatus necessarily means that the right to be naked cannot be extended to those who are not 'innocent', 'clean', or capable of sexual self-control: the 'fallen' ones.

Agamben makes the point well:

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[309] See Chapter 3.

'If, at the beginning of the twentieth century, there spread from Germany to the rest of Europe movements preaching nudism as a new social ideal that could be reconciled with our human nature, it is no surprise that this was possible only by opposing the obscene nudity of pornography and prostitution with nudity as *Lichtkleid* (clothes of light), thereby unknowingly evoking the ancient theological conception of innocent nudity as clothing of grace. What those naturists displayed was therefore not nudity but rather clothing – not nature but rather grace' (2011b: 66)

Naturists' practice, and their justifications, imply an assertion of moral superiority over the rest; naturists flaunt their clothing of grace.

Such positions were explicitly stated in the writings of some early proponents of naturism, who heavily relied on Christian theology to justify their positions. Barcan notes:

'Since many nudists were Christians, they turned to the Bible… often taking the Adam and Eve story as their starting point' (2004b: 3)

The ambiguities in the role of clothes in *Genesis* and the many problems surrounding the doctrine of original sin and the Christian theology of the body were central to the theses of many early (Protestant) nudists, who rejected the Augustinian interpretation[310] and argued that clothes were necessary only to a *corrupt* humanity. The Reverend Clarence Norwood, advocating for nudism in 1930s England, explicitly argued for embracing nudity as a way to reclaim innocence, on theological grounds (ibid.).

The Christian theological foundations of naturism made it understandable and acceptable to Europeans in the early 20th century and beyond. 'Innocent', asexual naturism could be partially integrated into the order of Christian European societies, to some extent[311]. However, the cost of this partial integration was that naturism had to accept the Christian metaphysical order. It endorsed the Christian division between nature and grace, as well as

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[310] See Chapter 3.
[311] Naturism's popularity among socialist intellectuals and the GDR establishment may be due to Christianity's influence on Marxism – but I will not explore this suggestion here.

the subsequent divisions that structure the Christian metaphysical order (nudity vs clothing, dirty vs clean, etc.). Consequently, naturism positioned itself *within* the existing religious order, rather than outside or against it. In fact, in order to gain acceptance from many people, naturists frequently claimed to be even more moral – *and Christian* – than others. They argued that their naked bodies were *less sexual – more innocent, purer* – compared to clothed bodies.

As a result, the practice of nudity within naturism becomes not only conceptually disturbing, but also, most importantly, not fun. Personally, I love being naked, but I am not particularly interested in being naked around rigidly moralizing naturists who believe they are morally superior to others because they are disciplined, clean, and asexual[312]. Fortunately, there are exceptions – not all naturists assert their 'innocence', 'purity', and moral superiority. One notable exception is the naturist village of Cap D'Agde, in France, which I discuss below.

6. Cap D'Agde and sex-positive 'naturism'

At first glance, the naturist village of Cap D'Agde looks like many other Mediterranean holiday towns. There is a harbour, there are cafés, restaurants, and shops. There is a long sandy beach, lined with more bars and restaurants. There is a hotel, a campsite, modernist apartment blocks, a shopping centre. Driving there, nothing seems out of the ordinary – except there is a gate at the entrance of the village – and beyond the gate, most people are naked. Cap D'Agde is the world's largest nudist town – in summer, its population swells to 40,000[313]. The first and most obvious difference between Cap D'Agde and the usual naturist establishments is that Cap D'Agde is an *entire* naked town – not just a campsite, a beach, or a hotel.

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[312] Additionally, naturists' claims to moral superiority can be seen as justifying existing social hierarchies. In Chapter 3, I noted that Christian associations of 'humanity' with 'clothedness' and the experience of racism make nudity safer for whites than for non-whites. In this context, naturists' belief in their 'moral superiority' risks reinforcing stereotypes of inferiority among darker-skinned individuals.
[313] https://www.theguardian.com/cities/2015/aug/27/naked-city-cap-agde-sun-swingers-shoplifting

The second difference is that Cap D'Agde is not a prude naturist site. It isn't sex-negative. Despite being avowedly naturist – it calls itself 'the world capital of naturism' – it is, paradoxically, full of clothing shops, which mainly sell fetish gear (what on Earth do fetish clothes have to do with naturism?). The average demographic is significantly different from what one finds in typical FKK sites, too – visitors to Cap D'Agde are generally younger; the place never feels like a retirement community. There is a distinct party vibe. The beach is a 5km long stretch of sand: the section of the beach nearer to the town centre resembles most FKK beaches, but as one keeps walking along the beach, the average age decreases and there is a noticeable change in vibe. Sooner or later, one will come across couples – or groups – having public sex in the middle of the beach. They may be surrounded by voyeurs enjoying the show, while many others go about their normal beach day around them, reading books and eating ice-creams, as if nothing out of the ordinary were happening.

I like the naturist village of Cap D'Agde. To me, it feels much freer than most FKK spaces. I am allowed to be naked wherever and whenever I want: although everyone dresses up for the evening, there is no rule forcing people to do it. Nobody ever told me off for dining in restaurants naked, even though I was the only one. In many respects, Cap D'Agde represents the utopia I dream of, a social experiment where normal rules against nudity and sex do not apply, and which does not try to justify itself through claims of moral (Christian) superiority or displays of moral discipline, sexual self-control, and so on. Compared to the experience of German or English puritanical naturism, I say: *Vive la France*!

7. Cap D'Agde and the many problems of swingers' 'naturism'

However, as the initial excitement fades, visitors to Cap D'Agde might notice problematic dynamics. For example: why does everyone suddenly wear clothes in the evening after being naked all day in the hot Mediterranean summer? And why do men in the evening wear boring shirts and trousers (are they going to work?) while women tend to wear revealing nighties, lingerie, and fetish gear?

What becomes quickly apparent is that the naturist village of Cap D'Agde after sunset becomes a massive swingers' resort, adopting its social norms. The thousands of swingers that gather in Cap D'Agde in the summer prioritize enjoyment and freedom over the moral superiority, sexual self-control, and cleanliness associated with naturism. They do not seek moral justification for their practices.

However, (implicit) rules still govern their night-time activities. Why do sexual activities at night require clothing when nudity is the norm during the day? Why is there such a distinct separation between daytime and night-time norms? I suggest that in Cap D'Agde there is simply a juxtaposition of a nudist beach resort during the day and swingers' resort at night. The sex-positive atmosphere creates a more relaxed daytime experience compared to the puritanism and moralism found in most FKK resorts. However, as a swingers' resort, Cap D'Agde perpetuates the traditional Christian separations. At night, clothing is re-introduced to sexualize and gender the bodies, in accordance with customary Christian/Western technologies of (sexual) desire.

First, why is there a need to get dressed in the evening, in a *nudist* resort? In Christianity, sexual arousal is associated with clothing, as nudity is only possible as an undressing (Chapter 3). Nudity as a state is only conceivable as prelapsarian grace, and thus it is asexual and not sexually arousing, like the nudity of FKK. To experience nudity as sexually arousing, Christians must begin by wearing clothes, which they *then* remove to reveal the hidden flesh underneath. Undressing exposes the supposedly 'dirty', sexual nature that we conceal under our 'clean', graceful clothes. As naturists' 'clothing of light' cannot be visibly removed, they must wear textile clothes that can be taken off to become 'sexy'. Consequently, there is the paradox of thousands of 'naturists' suddenly wearing clothes at sunset in the attempt to become 'sexy', which is undoubtedly perplexing to any observant and critical individual.

Second, there is the baffling fact that many[314] wear fetish gear instead of normal clothes. Why? Perhaps, the reason is that Christian sexual desire aims at the *flesh* of the Other, but reaching this flesh – the animal, ungracious part – is ultimately impossible, for lack of grace

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[314] Women, especially – see below in relation to gender dynamics.

is as delusional as grace itself. Even under the clothes that people wear at night in Cap D'Agde, potential sexual partners will not find any 'graceless' flesh: instead, they will find the same naked bodies they had been seeing on the beach a few hours earlier. The sudden concealing of bodies after sunset is not enough to make the body of the Other become 'flesh' – and thus arousing – again. In this context, fetish gear serves to add gracelessness to the body of the Other. One is reminded of Agamben's description of the job of the sadist, who

> 'tries, in every possible way, to make the flesh appear, to force the body of the Other into incongruous positions that reveal its obscenity, that is, its irreparable loss of all grace' (2011b: 75).

I have not been to Cap D'Agde in many years, and things may have changed in the meantime. However, based on my previous experiences, a third glaring problem in Cap D'Agde was the obvious gender divide. Arguably, this reflects the broader fact that swingers' spaces are generally heteronormative, and disturbingly so. Perhaps it is a generational problem, or perhaps it is because queer, sex-positive crowds do not tend to share spaces with heteronormative swingers.

Thus, behind the appearance of a social utopia that allows nudity and sex in a normal urban setting, even Cap D'Agde reproduces many of the usual separations of the everyday order. I still love the fact that in Cap D'Agde I can be naked when and where I wish, in a 'normal' urban setting, and without the oppressive and judgmental looks of moralistic, puritanical naturists. In the daytime, while everyone is still naked, Cap D'Agde offers a glimpse of what city life could be without the prohibition of public nudity. After dusk, however, the usual clothed social order returns. Public nudity becomes very rare and uncomfortable – I once went to a bar for an evening drink naked, and the waiter commented on it, pointing out I was the only naked customer.

Finally, there is also the issue of the naturist village's separation from the 'normal' world. The naturist village is surrounded by a fence, with a gate for entry. The separation between the 'special' space where nudity is accepted and the 'normal' world where nudity is unimaginable is clear; these two realms never overlap. In the following sections, I consider

'naturist' spaces that are not physically segregated from the 'normal' world, such as the World Naked Bike Ride events held annually in various cities worldwide.

8. Nudity and World Naked Bike Rides

Up to this point, in this chapter, I have discussed naturism/nudism as a practice that occurs in separate, designated spaces – separate from the everyday, clothed normality of modern Western life[315]. Moving forward, I will set aside naturism as a beach or holiday practice – removed from normal, clothed life – and instead focus on experiences of naturism that challenge the division between clothed and naked spaces, potentially creating opportunities for nudity *within* a clothed society. The many naked bike rides that have been happening across the Western world under the *World Naked Bike Ride* umbrella serve as an interesting case study.

World Naked Bike Rides are demonstrations in which people ride their bikes naked through their cities. They are both a protest against cars and a celebration of body positivity. The size of these naked bike rides can vary significantly; in large cities like London, thousands of cyclists participate (Fig. 28). I have personally taken part in numerous World Naked Bike Rides over the years.

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[315] Even in Communist East Germany, where naturism was common, the prohibition of nudity in normal everyday life remained in force like everywhere else.

Fig. 28 World Naked Bike Ride in London, 2022

What intrigues me about World Naked Bike Rides is that they occur within normal city life. There is no spatial separation: for a few hours, naked riders and clothed pedestrians share the same space (Figs. 28-30). For the naked riders, this allows for the simultaneously exhilarating *and* uncomfortable experience of being nude in spaces where they are typically clothed. It feels almost like breaching the divide between the sacred and the profane (see Chapter 2). Passersby may also feel like a breach of the sacred/profane separation is suddenly happening.

However, it is important to recognize that planned and anticipated breaches of religious prohibitions differ from spontaneous and unplanned ones. Sociologists of religion, such as Durkheim and Douglas, highlight the fact that *all* religious prohibitions, in *any* society, can be broken in certain occasions. *Festivals* provide the opportunity for the communal violation of everyday religious prohibitions. Festival participants

> 'are so far removed from the ordinary conditions of life, and they are so thoroughly conscious of it, that they feel they must set themselves outside of and above their ordinary morals' (Durkheim, 1964: 216)

World Naked Bike Rides are festivals; they are *sanctioned* occasions where the sacred prohibition of nudity and the separation between realms are suspended. During a festival, one is given *permission* to breach the rules. Even though the affective experience of breaching the everyday normal rules still happens (to some extent), the festival-goer is not *truly* breaching the rules – what is happening is *play*. Festivals are occasions where one is allowed to *play* with the experience of breaching the rules within a clear container and a sanctioned framework. Play is important, obviously, but it should not be confused with the real thing.

The purpose of play is to allow people a safe space to indulge in some socially inappropriate desires, and thus to ensure such desires do not find outlets in the normal world, where they would be inappropriate or dangerous. Anthropologist of religion Albert Piette says:

> 'the antithetic behavior of festival destroy[s] social convention in order to reinforce it' (Piette, 1992: 40).

The examples are countless: for example, prohibitions against violence may be playfully breached in playfighting or sports, and prohibitions against sexual practices may be breached in role-playing, where even incest or rape become perfectly acceptable. The purpose of festivals is to provide a container where play can safely happen – and this is precisely what happens at World Naked Bike Rides, where, for a few hours, nudity stops being dangerous. Onlookers cheer at riders – and laugh at the sight of what in other circumstances they would perceive as a dangerous intrusion into their own safe personal space, or as 'disgusting', as evidence of 'paedophilia' or unspecified 'perversion'. At World Naked Bike Ride events, a magical power – or rather more precisely: the suspension of the magical power usually at work in the everyday realm – ensures that even children exposed to naked bodies do not suffer life-long traumatic consequences.

Fig. 29 London World Naked Bike Ride.

Onlookers were cheering and I am not aware of anyone – not even children! – having suffered traumatic consequences of a result of seeing naked bodies

Fig. 30 London World Naked Bike Ride.

More evidence of passers-by (including children) seeing naked bodies at the London World Naked Bike Ride without apparently suffering traumatic consequences from the exposure.

Rules apply, however. As with all religious festivals, the time and space where the religious prohibition of nudity is suspended is clearly defined. This allows for the sacred space/time to remain separate from the profane domain, and to avoid the risk of contamination, thus enabling the experience of play to take place safely. Therefore, World Naked Bike Rides occur on predetermined and publicized dates, at specified times, and following established routes through the city. Nudity is not expected outsides the specified times and spaces. Therefore, even though naked bike rides do allow participants to be naked in the normal world (as opposed to what happens in naturist resorts, which are physically isolated and distant), boundaries still exist. These boundaries and separations from the normal realm define the experience: from society's perspective, clear boundaries and separations make the experience of the sacred safe *and therefore* permissible.

Naked bike rides are 'sacred', exceptional spaces – and yet, as I have been emphasizing throughout this work the legality of public nudity in England means that cycling naked around our cities is always perfectly legal – *any day* and *anywhere*. There is no legal reason forcing riders to limit their nudity to the advertised times and planned routes. At World Naked Bike Ride events, the boundary that separates sacred from profane becomes unusually easy to cross, from both a practical and psychological standpoint – or at least that has been my own experience.

9. Lingering mischievously on the other side

In my normal, everyday life, I always get dressed before leaving home. Although I have been experimenting with wearing less and more-revealing clothes, I have never walked out of my front door completely naked. When wearing transparent clothes or fishnets, I always had some underwear covering my genitals. Although in theory I could lawfully walk around naked, and even though I always carry a hard copy of the official police guidelines on nudity[316] with me just in case, I simply lack the courage to walk around naked. However, if I am *already* naked in public, I find it psychologically much easier to *remain* naked.

Based on my personal experience, once I have crossed the limits into the prohibited beyond, lingering on the other side feels much less uncomfortable and scary than crossing the limit felt in the first place. Many times, after participating in naked bike rides, I have chosen to remain naked when everyone else puts their clothes back on. Cycling back home naked across London, alone, *after* attending naked bike rides feels much more comfortable – or less uncomfortable – than it would have felt to be publicly naked before attending the ride. Cycling naked through normal London neighbourhoods, away from any naked bike ride, becomes psychologically much easier after I have already been naked in public for some time. The fear of the prohibited beyond returns gradually, not immediately. This psychological phenomenon creates opportunities to experience nudity within the normal clothed world – by taking advantage of the spatial and temporal proximity of the sacred and profane worlds that exist around naturist events such as the World Naked Bike Ride.

A similar experience arises when, during a World Naked Bike Ride event, participants stray beyond the spatial limits within which transgression is expected. For example, on a couple of occasions I have momentarily left the ride to walk into shops or supermarkets along the route – naked – to buy drinks. I have spoken to other participants who have done the same, and we all found the psychological experience interesting. Once, as we were having some after-naked-bike-ride drinks – naked – in a pub, I transgressed the limit that the pub had set of 'no

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[316] See Appendix A.

nakedness outside the pub' and did go to drink outside, naked, on the pavement, among pedestrians and passing cars. It felt liberating, and not even particularly uncomfortable.

The experiences of lingering or straying beyond the limit that I have just mentioned are perhaps comparable to what happens when visitors to nudist beaches stray beyond the boundaries of the nudist beach. Many nudist beaches are isolated coves, hard to reach and physically separated from nearby normal (textiles) beaches – but other nudist beaches are just sections of long, mostly-textile beaches. In such cases, it is relatively common for nudists to walk along the beach until they are the only naked people. If one does not stray too far from the nudist section of the beach, this is generally okay.

These experiences of lingering or straying beyond the limits of sanctioned nudist spaces allow the introduction of nudity in the clothed world by relying on the proximity of the two separate realms. However, can such experiences provide anything more than just a momentarily glimpse of what it is like to be beyond the limit?

First, it is important to note the difference between, on one hand, the psychological experience of lingering or straying beyond the limits after communal and sanctioned acts of transgressions and, on the other hand, the experience of crossing a limit that was once crossed before but later recrossed. Once I recross the limit and I return to the normal world, the line that separates the prohibited from the permitted quickly closes again. The crossing of the line, however recent, appears once again impossible; as Foucault says, the limit 'return[s] once more to the horizon of the uncrossable'[317]. Thus, the fact that I have attended 10 or 20 World Naked Bike Rides in the past does not make it any less difficult and uncomfortable for me to cycle around London naked outside the container of a World Naked Bike Ride. I may have been naked on countless nudist beaches over the years, but I still feel too uncomfortable to be casually naked on a non-nudist beach. The experiences I discussed above do not help to overcome the psychological obstacles that prevent me from embracing my nudity in public spaces.

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[317] See 2.6 above.

Second, lingering on or straying beyond the limit may make it psychologically easier *for me* to experience the beyond of the normal prohibition of nudity, but it does not affect how *others* experience my nudity. And it is the experience of *others* who are faced with my nudity that ultimately makes it impossible or highly inadvisable for me to be casually naked in public. Hence, there may be little value in taking advantage of (limited) opportunities to blur the boundaries that arise around socially sanctioned experiences of nudity. Ultimately, the domains where nudity is allowed and where nudity is prohibited remain separated, and this fundamental, metaphysical separation is unaffected by any momentary blurring of boundaries that may sometimes occur.

Third, as I discuss below, the blurring of boundaries also occurs in the opposite sense: I have been in situations where I was naked in *supposedly* permitted spaces, as a participant in World Naked Bike Ride events, However, onlookers were unaware of the event taking place and reacted as if normal prohibitions applied. Just as the normal prohibition of public nudity is enforced not by State laws but by society, so festivals and events allowing for communal transgression rely not on some official recognition (such as police approval or mayoral endorsement) but on the tacit agreement of members of society to suspend the normal rules. Under normal circumstances, these members would police the prohibition. If bystanders are unaware that a festival is taking place and that normal rules are suspended, it is effectively *as if* there were no festival. Additionally, if members of society do not want the normal rules to be suspended, even momentarily, there can be no festival. In the next section I discuss World Naked Bike Rides where the local population did not want the religious prohibition of nudity to be suspended, not even for a festival lasting a few hours and limited to a few streets.

10. World Naked Bike Rides with only a handful of participants: reports from the frontline

Recently[318], I took part in an official World Naked Bike Ride event in the town of Colchester, Essex. When I arrived at the assembly point for the ride, there were only two other people there (the organizers). By the time we were supposed to set off for the ride, there were seven

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[318] July 2023.

of us. It was only at this point that we got naked. However, we decided to wait around a bit longer for latecomers – this is when things became uncomfortable. The assembly point was in the town centre, and it was a sunny Sunday, with plenty of people around. Colchester is a predominantly white, English, working-class, and socially conservative town. Many passers-by became enraged upon seeing us naked. In a matter of minutes, we were aggressively confronted by several furious men[319] shouting abuse at us. I took some notes: 'You dirty cunts', 'Paedophiles, get the fuck out of here', and the usual 'There are children here, what the fuck are you doing?'. To say that the reception was unfriendly would be a major understatement.

Although the Colchester World Naked Bike Ride event had the approval of the police and authorities, the residents we encountered in the streets were unaware and uninterested. To them, nudity was morally wrong and dangerous for their children. Our event could not *possibly* have been authorized and lawful in their eyes, and they were *fully* prepared to use violence against us – even in front of their children – to ensure 'we got the fuck out' of their town, and quickly. This marked the beginning and the end of the Colchester World Naked Bike Ride 2023 – we got dressed and left.

The experience in Colchester reminded me of what had happened in the nearby town of Romford a year before, where at a World Naked Bike Ride event with only 20 participants the police had to escort us throughout the ride to protect us from angry local residents. Without that police escort, I doubt that ride could have taken place safely.

A few weeks before the aborted Colchester event, the World Naked Bike Ride had passed through the streets of London. The London ride was attended by thousands of riders, and along the route riders were cheered on by thousands of passers-by, clapping and taking photos (Figs. 28-30). That joyful and fun public reception could not have been more different than what we later found in Colchester. However, due to the size of London, the London Naked Bike Ride had several starting points located in various parts of the metropolis. Riders started from their different starting points and joined together once they arrived in central

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[319] They were all men.

London. Last year, 2023, I began my ride from a starting point in Croydon (South London), together with a friend who lives around there. Croydon is *far* from central London – from our Croydon start, we had to ride some 20 km (around 2 hours) through largely-black South London neighbourhoods where people were unaware and uninterested in the World Naked Bike Ride. Also, being that far from London, only 18 of us started from there.

In Croydon and the other South London suburbs we rode through on our way to central London, there were no cheering crowds supporting us. Instead, like in Colchester, there were plenty of angry men abusing us, telling us to get dressed, calling us 'paedophiles' and 'perverts'. Some drivers threw stuff at us from their cars: one threw a plastic water bottle which hit one of us, another threw a plastic cup full of ice cubes at us. All the female riders in our group felt too uncomfortable to continue and went home. For those of us who stayed, the contrast between the angry reception we encountered on our way from Croydon to central London and the cheering we later experienced in central London raised troubling questions, which I introduce below.

Another starting point for the London World Naked Bike Ride 2023 was in Victoria Park, East London. In previous years, this had been one of the most popular starting points, because of East London's young and hip crowds – it is diverse, international, and multicultural. East London, however, is also home to a large Muslim population – particularly Asian communities that remain segregated from the young and hip crowd that has gentrified much of East London in the early 21st century. A few days before the Naked Bike Ride, representatives of local Muslim associations announced their opposition to it and asked for it to be cancelled. The local Muslim associations planned a counter-demonstration of the streets of East London against us 'perverts' and 'paedophiles'. They threatened to bring children into the streets where the Naked Ride was supposed to pass so that naked riders could be criminally charged for 'indecent exposure'[320]. Under pressure from the local Muslim associations, the local council took the World Naked Bike Ride organizers to court, applying for a last-minute injunction to stop the World Naked Nike Ride from happening.

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[320] By attending the ride knowing that crowds of Muslim children would have been there, riders could have been accused of 'intentionally causing distress'.

The council lost the court case[321] but, to avoid troubles, the organizers of the Ride cancelled the East London leg of the ride anyway.

Another (smaller) official World Naked Bike Ride event that had been scheduled to take place in East London later in summer 2023 was also cancelled, to avoid stress, complications, and legal bills.

These examples expose a major problem faced by naturist spaces which are not completely separate from the normal world in the way naturist camps are. Although naturist events and festivals like the World Naked Bike Ride retain a degree of separation from the normal world – both in time and in space – their boundaries are thin and blurred. People unaware of the event – or against it – will not even notice any boundaries; unaware passers-by will react as if an illegal breach of the religious prohibition were taking place. Seen from my own perspective of someone seeking to challenge the exclusion of the naked body from normal human spaces, such events and their thin boundaries offer interesting opportunities for playing with the limit. But seen from the perspective of those who most fervently endorse the prohibition of nudity and the religious ideal of disembodied humanity, such thin and blurred boundaries render such events unacceptable and offensive.

11. World Naked Bike Rides: further reflections

In light of these considerations, I return to the problem I have been wrestling with, in various forms, throughout this work. World Naked Bike Ride organizers must carefully consider whether it is appropriate or sensible for them to impose their values and beliefs, no matter how 'right' we believe them to be, on people who, for whatever reasons, reject them. The freedom of expression and body freedom exhibited by World Naked Bike Ride participants, even if it only occurs once a year and with the approval of authorities, is viewed as 'wrong', offensive, and dangerous by many individuals in society. Many people have strong negative

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[321] Because the World Naked Bike Ride had been publicized and approved months before by all the relevant authorities.

reactions and are prepared to use violence and abuse to protect their community from the perceived 'threat' of nudity.

Being abused feels horrible. The belief in the correctness of one's moral stance does not make being targeted by masses of bigots any less unpleasant. As a fellow participant in the cancelled Colchester World Naked Bike Ride remarked while getting dressed in response to abusive comments from onlookers, 'I do not want to martyr myself'. The emotional experience of being abused serves as an effective deterrent against fighting for unpopular causes, no matter how just and urgent they may be. It also discourages individuals from exploring their freedom in the posthumanist sense as described by Foucault and Nietzsche or engaging in the critical thinking proposed by Kant in his 'What is Enlightenment?' article, as discussed in Chapter 1. Most people quickly suppress their critical sense when they feel it challenges their sense of belonging.

There is another issue that requires attention. Participants in World naked Bike Rides are predominantly white and middle class. Anecdotally, based on my own experiences as a participant, local residents in predominantly non-white and working-class areas react with anger towards naked riders. This includes working-class towns like Colchester or Romford, black communities in South London, and the Pakistani and Bangladeshi communities of East London. Conversely, white middle-class individuals seem to be less bothered by nudity and often offer open support. Similarly, when cycling around London naked (or almost-naked) on my own, I receive much more abuse in working-class and non-white neighbourhoods compared to white middle-class ones. In the white and affluent suburban neighbourhood where I live, the only abuse I receive comes from van drivers and construction workers[322].

On the one hand, this observation supports the theory I proposed in Chapter 3, where I suggested that the cultural and historical relations between nudity and the dehumanization of colonized and oppressed groups means that nudity feels much safer for those who are less at risk or under threat of dehumanization. Introducing Chapter 5, I noted that many of my

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[322] However, this could also be because white middle-class English people see publicly abusing people as socially inappropriate.

academic colleagues were angered by my nudity because they perceived it as flaunting my social/racial privilege.

On the other hand, however, I am troubled by what may well seem a stoking of class and racial warfare by the privileged ones. Are World Naked Bike Rides instances of 'woke', urban, white middle-classes flaunting their 'wokery' in the face of socially conservative sectors of society – whose social conservatism arguably follows from historical conditions of political oppression under the same urban, white middle-classes who now insensitively flaunt their 'wokery' in their face? It is important to remember that it was the (Christian) English middle- and upper-classes – together with other (Christian) European powers – who imposed the prohibition of nudity[323] on the peoples they colonized. Similarly, it was the upper classes who imposed Christian conservative social values on the working classes. While it is surely okay for the white middle-classes to now rebel against the traditional values they have inherited, should they perhaps, as a sign of respect, refrain from staging their demonstrations in non-white or working-class areas, where many might disagree[324]? This *may* be right, but it is also dangerous territory.

Be that as it may, following the experience of the forced cancellation of the East London leg of the London Naked Bike Ride, the cancellation of the East London Ride, and the failure of the Colchester World Naked Bike Ride, London naturist activists are increasingly moving away from the project of organizing naturist events in the middle of a clothed society. They are retreating to spaces where the separation from the normal, clothed society is clearer; where they cannot be seen (and abused) by bigots. For years, London naturist activists had been organizing summer picnics in London parks. These picnics were always official events approved by the relevant authorities; in my experience, there were never any problems. In 2023, however, the summer picnic was moved to a *private* address – the suburban residence of a local activist, which has a large and secluded garden. In England, despite nudity having been decriminalized since 2003, the trend points to a return to the secretive practice of naturism in secluded private properties or remote country clubs.

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[323] And that of homosexuality, etc. – all in the name of Christianity and of 'humanizing' (Christianizing) the colonized, of course.
[324] But 'respect' for what, precisely?

Elsewhere, the backward trend is even stronger: in Wisconsin, for example, the Senate approved a bill on 16th January 2024 that prohibits events where children might be exposed to nudity, as well as *any* intentional public nudity[325]. Either way, they outlaw World Naked Bike Rides. This follows a media outcry and moral panic sparked after it was revealed that a mother attended Madison's World Naked Bike Ride with her daughter. She said:

> 'As a parent, it is my responsibility to prepare my daughter to be a thoughtful adult who is engaged with her community. The World Naked Bike Ride is a place of empowerment for my daughter and I, we have participated several times because it is a rare situation where we can exercise freedom over our own bodies and be naked of liability for the behavior of others towards our bodies. I would like to believe that our community values, freedom of speech, self-expression, and the right to protest. Those bills would do harm to those freedoms, and as a parent, I must try to preserve those freedoms so that my daughter may continue to enjoy them.'[326]

However, politicians, journalists, and public opinion in Wisconsin seemingly agree on the need to do whatever it takes to ensure children are not exposed to naked human bodies[327].

12. The historical failure and demise of naturism

I began this chapter wondering if naturism may be a possible alternative in the face of the reactions I encountered when I tried to embrace my naked body in the normal world. People immediately perceive my desire to be naked as a form of violence against them and their safe, orderly, communities. Their reactions are so immediate and visceral that I cannot reason with them. If I want to embrace my body without the shame and fears of mainstream society, it clearly has to be somewhere else. Naturism is a collective and organized practice, which

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[325] Senate Bill 477 and Senate Bill 478 respectively.
[326] https://www.change.org/p/tell-wi-governor-tony-evers-to-veto-anti-nudity-bills
[327] In Spring 2024, the Wisconsin State Legislature bills opted not to advance those bills any further, for the time being at least. However, similar bills have been proposed in Hawaii, HB1873 and SB2251, with the stated aim of 'protecting the children' from (any) exposure to nudity and making even organized naturism an adult-only activity.

takes place within separate, contained, and hence safe spaces – 'safe' for the broader society, and therefore also for naturists who are not perceived as 'perverts' endangering 'respectable', 'decent', 'human' communities. However, in my discussion I tried to show a number of significant problems related to the practice of naturism.

There remain theoretical problems with naturism, which are rooted in its reliance on the same religious foundations that underpin the prohibition of nudity in mainstream society. Naturists claim that their nudity is 'innocent'; however, not only is this claim nonsensical without the Christian doctrine of sin, but it is also conducive to claims of moral superiority, which remain uncritically situated within a Christian framework (asexuality, sexual control, etc.). There are also practical problems with naturism, particularly the fact that it exists *separately* from the normal world. Naturism is practised in *secluded* camps and private clubs, which does not challenge the ongoing prohibition and exclusion of nudity in 'normal' life. In fact, as was the case in East Germany, naturist spaces may even serve as a release valve that ultimately protects the existing oppressive social order.

Recently, naturist events like the World Naked Bike Ride have taken place across the Western world. These events can be seen as attempts to integrate naturism into 'normal' (clothed) spaces. However, naked bike rides maintain boundaries that separate them from the everyday world, although these boundaries are less clear compared to naturist clubs or campsites. This blurred boundary generates opportunities (or *risks*, depending on one's perspective) for contagion. Naked participants experience nudity in their 'normal', urban environment, engaging with people who may find nudity offensive or dangerous. While I question the effectiveness of such isolated opportunities towards the goal of normalizing nudity within the 'normal' (since they are ultimately *festivals*) they are becoming increasingly unfeasible due to the vocal opposition from certain sectors of the public.

Additionally, there remains the glaring fact that membership in naturist organizations has been declining – a trend particularly evident in England, the U.S., and Germany, as previously discussed. In England, naturists predominantly consist of aging white men, and as they age, naturism is also declining. Why is this happening? I propose that naturism's failure to attract a younger and more diverse membership is both a symptom and a cause of its

decline. Naturism's historical association with traditional Christian values, notions of discipline, cleanliness, sexual repression ('self-control'), and its dislike for 'fun-seeking youngsters' have deterred young people from becoming involved[328]. Since naturist clubs tend to exist separately from normal society, in secluded locations, younger individuals have little incentive to join. Only those who have a strong curiosity about social nudity make the effort to visit a naturist club.

Unfortunately, those who make the effort to visit a naturist club often find themselves surrounded by much older people with whom they may have little in common. This is particularly true in England, where the situation is quite disheartening. When non-English or non-white individuals go to English naturist clubs, they quickly realize that they are the only non-white-English people around. They soon notice the casual racism that pervades all the conversations people have with them, and their older, white, English counterparts seem oblivious. Speaking from personal experience, I have felt unwelcome and out of place whenever I made the effort to visit these clubs, and I have no desire to return.

In a recent conversation on nudism on Reddit[329], an older naturist asked the question that older naturists often ask: 'where are all the young naturists?'. A younger user (*Der_mann_hald*) answered the original poster (OP) in the clearest terms:

> 'I don't wanna hang out with a room full of nude people, I wanna spend a nice evening with my friends… I want to do fun stuff that I feel like with the people I feel like. Whenever I have been to either a sauna or nude place, it's mostly boring'.

As the OP did not seem to understand, other younger posters chimed in. User *offgridgamer0,* who identifies as an 'LGBT nudist', added:

> 'This is what some resorts don't understand. I don't want to sit in a quiet room with a bunch of older people talking politics… Resorts tend to not understand what the younger people want to do for fun.'

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[328] Things seem to be going better in less puritanical, Southern European countries.
[329] r/nudism

User *exposition42* agreed:

> 'Us younger folks (and that includes me in my mid-40s) pick friends and fun over hanging in a room full of naked people just because it's naked'.

If, in the name of respecting others and their religious beliefs and fears, the practice of social nudity is banned from public spaces and confined to naturist clubs and resorts, with their outdated attitudes, anti-fun rules, and older membership, I – like the Reddit users I quoted above – have no desire to partake.

Conclusion

I began this chapter by asking if naturism may be an acceptable alternative, however imperfect, to the impossibility of embracing my naked body within normal society. My answer is 'no'. Naturism has remained attached to an outdated (and essentially Christian) view of itself, which has alienated the younger generations. As a result, naturism is dying out, as elderly members pass away and are not replaced. Like many other younger, queer, and fun-loving people, I have no desire to join a naturist club.

Besides naturist spaces, there are other spaces where nudity is allowed and can be fun, relaxed, non-judgmental, diverse, and queer-friendly. In these spaces, the experience of nudity can feel liberating and not unnecessarily oppressive. For example, hippie-ish festivals can be nudity-friendly, although full nudity is rare and, therefore, uncomfortable. Additionally, festival nudity remains an event: a momentary experience of a beyond that remains normally prohibited. Many clothing-optional beaches, especially in Southern Europe, have a fun, queer, and relaxed energy. They are lovely places to spend a few hours, but, again, the experience ends when the sun sets and people go home. While the queer scene is generally body-positive, full nudity is usually only allowed at sex parties. Similarly, queer parties are also only a momentary transgression of the clothed norm. I have yet to find a

space where I am allowed to embrace my naked body *normally*, as opposed to nudity becoming possible only *as an event*.

I have reached what seems like a dead end in my adventure. I set off seeking to free my body from its enforced clandestinity in my public, 'normal' life. The journey has been challenging, emotionally difficult, and often unpleasant. The visceral and violent reactions I have encountered whenever I tried to be naked suggest that the only safe way for me to be naked is to retreat to private spaces or naturist clubs, which I have little desire to be a part of. The modern, Western ideal of 'humanity' is incompatible with naked bodies.

Conclusion

1. My project of posthumanist freedom

I started this project to reflect practically on the concept of posthumanist freedom proposed by Nietzsche and Foucault. Building on the Enlightenment and Kantian project of a 'critique of reason', Nietzsche and Foucault encourage their readers to question societal practices and value judgments they have always considered 'normal', 'obvious', appropriate, or unquestionable. Their writings challenge the perceived obviousness of the existing order, urging individuals to play with the limits, explore new possibilities, be creative.

I called 'posthumanist freedom' the freedom we may (or may not) have to do things differently from what is normal and expected within society, to challenge the limits of the established order, and to creatively shape ourselves in new and hitherto 'unthinkable' ways. I sought to distinguish this freedom from the senses in which freedom is commonly understood in humanist discourses – in particular, from the 'freedoms' of liberal, Marxist, or psychoanalytic discourse. While in these 'freedoms', the outer boundaries of what is 'possible' are fixed and freedom is understood as the result of struggles for power, 'rights', truth, and/or order, I wanted to explore the possibility of disengaging from the ubiquitous power games of human societies to discover the freedom that lies *beyond* the limits of the established order. Imagining a being capable of this sort of freedom, Nietzsche had already called it the *Übermensch* – the posthuman.

I noted that, in the works of both Nietzsche and Foucault, the idea of posthumanist freedom remains somewhat abstract and vague. While reading their works, I wondered whether questioning the order is truly feasible. Commentators have often questioned whether subjects who are constituted by a given metaphysical order can meaningfully challenge that order. I have left this issue aside, and instead focussed on the practical challenges that arise when attempting to pursue Nietzsche's and Foucault's vision of posthumanist freedom. I am concerned that the seemingly commendable goal of critiquing inherited societal norms and customs may fundamentally clash with the practical function of norms, which is to maintain social cohesion. When individuals who are part of systemically interconnected social bonds challenge norms that are considered 'obvious' and unquestionable, they may set themselves outside of, and possibly against, their own society. Significantly, Zarathustra's 'revaluation of values' could only occur in isolation from other humans.

Instead of discussing my concerns in theory, I sought to deepen my understanding of the challenges involved in questioning societal norms by reflecting on my own experiences. I *practically* tested Nietzsche's and Foucault's ideal of posthumanist freedom in my everyday life. I challenged the modern Western prohibition/exclusion of my naked body from public/respectable spaces. I wanted my body to show up alongside my disembodied self (my 'soul') in my everyday life. I wanted to experience my society's reactions to my attempt to question its anti-body order.

2. What I have learned on my journey. Was posthumanist freedom merely an illusion?

After framing the conceptual problem in Chapter 1, in Chapters 2 and 3 I discussed the prohibition and exclusion of nudity in the Western order. I discussed its theoretical significance, emphasizing its role in constructing the concept of 'humanity' and justifying social hierarchies and power dynamics among 'humans'. I also touched upon the role of shame and fear in maintaining people's attachment to their 'humanity' and the social order.

In Chapters 4 and 5, I began sharing my personal experiences of rebellion. I recounted recent stories of what happened when I challenged the prohibition of nudity in various settings.

While my own feelings of shame diminished as I grew more accustomed to being naked in public, I faced unpleasant and violent reactions from others. I encountered their fear, panic, and rage. I became a target for their anger. Although this was never openly acknowledged, it is likely that I triggered intense shame in many individuals. Proving their social belonging seemed far more important to them than engaging in any 'critique of reason'.

My experiences and reflections suggest that the Enlightenment project of critiquing reason, particularly as continued by Nietzsche and Foucault, encounters significant and perhaps insurmountable barriers due to society's mechanisms. In seeking to challenge the norms and underlying beliefs of my society, in my own practice I have largely replicated Zarathustra's failure. The value of shared norms – no matter how arbitrary they may be – in fostering a sense of unity and community among people means that members of a social group resist attempts to critique them. The more crucial a value or belief is in defining a social group, the more challengers are viewed as public enemies.

As a result, those who strive to be different and question the established order of their societies are faced with a difficult choice between a lifelong, solitary, and ultimately futile struggle against their societies (Chapter 6) or retreating to separate (naturist, for example) communities with alternative social rules (Chapter 7). Both options have their drawbacks and are unappealing.

Referring to freedom in the posthumanist sense that I explored in this project, Foucault once said,

> 'My role – but it's a too pompous term – is to show people that they are much freer than they think.' (Foucault, 1988)

He is correct, in the sense that there are indeed many more possibilities available to people beyond what is normally considered 'possible' within the established order – public nudity being one of them. Any given metaphysical order severely restricts people's *perception* of what is possible – for example, the Western humanist order renders public nudity seemingly impossible. However, as my explorations of public nudity illustrate, the freedom to deviate

from the norm comes with significant consequences. Although I *can* exercise my freedom to be different, society's reactions make this an imprudent or unviable course of action.

The visceral and violent reactions of people to my naked body – their fear, their rage – made me realize the unrealistic nature of my ideal of posthumanist freedom. Modern Western societies tightly police their order, starting with the religious prohibition of nudity. By challenging the metaphysical, humanist order of their world, I exposed myself to reactions that I could not sustainably cope with.

I had imagined myself as a sort of modern Diogenes – but the radical philosophical practice available to philosophers like Diogenes in 4th century BCE Athens is impossible in 21st century London. In my modern society, there is no room for significant 'freedom to be different'. Difference is seen as criminality or madness. Nudity is perceived as evidence of *both* criminality and madness: it is 'perversion'. While minor freedoms that do not threaten the established order are allowed – and some may even go so far as to call British society 'tolerant' for allowing these minor freedoms, – I have learned that I cannot question the *limits* of the order. Fundamental norms, such as the enforced clothedness of 'humanity', are *not* to be challenged.

3. Additional takeaways: a momentary glimpse of freedom

Though my project to challenge the limits of my society's metaphysical order has largely failed due to the opposition I encountered in my society, perhaps my journey has not been a *total* failure. Even if I have been unable to fully embrace nudity in normal public spaces, in my attempts I have had glimpses of a freer, unclothed life. Being naked in the 'normal' world – albeit briefly and momentarily – did give me an outside perspective on the normal, clothed order.

In Chapter 6, I discussed Mona Eltahawy's struggle against the societal/religious order she grew up in. After years of compliance, she finally decided to defy the modesty culture of her

world. Suddenly, the prohibition she had been obeying no longer made sense to her. She asks herself:

'Why did I obey? Why did I wait so long to finally disobey?' (2015: 110)

I resonate with these words – I believe there is something important here. Like Eltahawy, when I experienced the world as a naked body, I also *felt* that another world is possible, that I have always had the freedom to disobey. While I may *choose* not to exercise that freedom for fear of consequences, my momentary experience of nudity made me realize that I am indeed freer than I thought – as Foucault states.

Seeing the world from an external perspective, like Raafat's extraterrestrial explorers or Thoreau's angel – changed the way I experience my own subjection to societal norms. The enchantment that made clothedness feel natural and necessary had dissipated. As I increasingly saw the clothed and ashamed people around me trapped in self-imposed religious/ideological prisons, I felt freer knowing that their conceptual, religious, and ideological prison were not mine, nor necessary. I now know that disobedience is an option available to me. I must learn to recognize safe vs. unsafe situations; however, having disobeyed several times before, I may do so again:

*O*nce you've tasted freedom, it stays in your heart and no one can take it away.

This newfound awareness of freedom, even from brief and unsustainable experiences, and the lasting trace these experiences of freedom have left on me, suggest that although the Enlightenment ideal of a critique of reason may be unattainable on a societal level, there may still be a path towards exploring more and more sustainable experiences of (posthumanist) freedom at an individual level, in relatively safer settings.

4. Further learning: from rational (humanist) freedom to shameless (posthumanist) freedom

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I began this journey with a *theoretical* reflection on freedom and critique. I started from Kant, according to whom reasoning together allows people to transcend their individual embodied circumstances and establish a shared normative framework. For Kant, the ability to access this disembodied 'reason' is what distinguishes humans from animals.

Nietzsche's critique of Kant largely focusses on Kant's faith in reason – in disembodied and 'public' reason. Nietzsche argues that our 'reason' is deeply rooted in our circumstances and *especially* physiological states. He suggests that individuals cannot reason critically unless they understand their own physiological reactions ('become physics', GS 335), to minimize the impact of their physiological reactions on their use of reason. Critical freedom requires embodied self-knowledge and awareness of our fundamental commonality with all the other ('animal') forms of life – as opposed to the humanist belief in human exceptionalism and disembodied reason.

The experiences I have discussed in this work support Nietzsche's insight. People's attachment to shared normative frameworks is not based on disembodied 'human' reason – instead, individual reactions and collective reasoning about perceived challenges to the order are *profoundly* affective. My adventures have highlighted the crucial importance of feelings of belonging, which hinder attempts to critique the normative frameworks of the groups we belong to. Belonging, from an embodied perspective, feels more urgent and important than freedom.

Furthermore, although in this work I have focussed on the reactions I experienced *from others* when exploring my freedom, similar considerations apply to *my own* affective responses. Embracing my nudity brought about the pain of defying my community's norms, leading to feelings of rejection and isolation. As I challenged societal norms, pushing myself to be naked in public, I became increasingly aware of my *shame*. Initially, I aligned with Nietzsche's criticism of 'herd morality'. However, my experience of shame when deviating from societal norms suggests that I am also hardwired to follow the herd. In Chapter 2, I discussed the function of shame as the psycho-social affect that in mammals ensures individuals' cohesion within their social group. My experience supported this, as I felt shame in me whenever I sought to act in ways that I felt may have been 'inappropriate'.

Thus, shame-reactions prevented me from fully exploring the experiences I sought. To challenge societal norms, I had to overcome my own shame reactions, which was not easy: often, I felt too ashamed to do what the curious part of me wanted to do. Shame also kept me safely away from the 'social death' I contemplated at the end of Chapter 4 as perhaps a possibility worth considering.

Yet perhaps there can be no serious discussion of critique and freedom without acknowledging the impact of our mammalian shame-responses on our ability to reason together. This does not mean that our physiological shame renders critique or freedom impossible, but rather that we must understand and learn to control our shame-responses for genuine critique and/or freedom to be achievable. Critical freedom cannot solely rely on the Western humanist ideal of disembodied reason.

Shame is a powerful force. As I belatedly recognized my own shame, I also realized that I felt ashamed of my shame. In retrospect, I now understand that discussions on shame should have had a more prominent role in this work. Perhaps I avoided addressing shame because it was difficult for me to openly discuss my own shame – it is easier to talk about freedom and ideology. However, through increasingly focussing on shame in my professional practice[330], I have come to see that shame is more common and pervasive than I initially thought. In Western societies, where individuals claim to be guided by 'reason' and consciously chosen beliefs and values, it is considered shameful to admit that unconscious shame-avoidance physiological mechanisms influence their conforming social behaviours and choices. Therefore, initiating a conversation about shame is no simple task.

Nevertheless, I now believe that the Enlightenment project of critiquing reason, as well as Nietzsche's and Foucault's ideas of freedom, depend crucially on our ability to understand, discuss, and ultimately control our mammalian shame. Of course, I don't suggest that all shame is inherently negative – arguably, no human society can exist without shame, and no shared normative framework can be enforced solely through abstract 'moral' principles or

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[330] www.playlovebodies.com.

oppressive structures. However, I do believe that the Nietzschean and Foucauldian ideals of posthumanist freedom require understanding and mastering our mammalian shame-responses.

My conclusion from these 'adventures in posthumanist freedom' appeared to me written on a hoodie I saw a woman wearing at a festival. That morning, though very hungover, I immediately recognized the significance of the message passed on to me. That hoodie read:

'No shame is freedom – Freedom is no shame'.

Fig. 31 Spreading the Word outside Birkbeck: No shame is freedom; Freedom is no shame

Postscript

It was a sunny and warm summer day, and after a day at the library reviewing the final draft of this work, I decided to cycle back home naked. I received the usual mix of reactions from passers-by: some cheered and praised me for my expression of freedom ('Yay!', 'You do you!' 'Freedom!'), while others (*all men*) shouted the usual derogatory remarks ('Paedophile!', 'Disgusting!', 'Faggot!', etc.). Although being abuse is always unpleasant, by now I have learned not to take it personally[331]. I was enjoying my lovely ride home – until I was stopped by the police.

I showed the police officer their own guidance on dealing with public nudity and naturism (Appendix A). The police guidance clarifies the law and clearly states that non-sexual public nudity (without intent to cause alarm and distress to a victim) is lawful, and the police should not intervene. I explained this to the officer and emphasized that the requirement of 'intent to cause alarm and distress' for charging someone with 'indecent exposure' is different from the *possibility* that someone might find the sight of a naked body alarming or distressing due their own religious/cultural/ideological beliefs. This distinction is clearly explained in the police guidance, but the officer refused to believe me or the official document I showed him.

Also, the officer suggested that I may have had some hidden 'sexual intent', which would have made my nudity unlawful. Even though I was simply riding my bicycle and minding my own business, the officer argued that this did not prove my *lack* of sexual intent – he claimed that sexual intent could be 'invisible', such as if I were receiving 'sexual gratification' from being naked in public[332]. According to him, my nudity *by itself* suggested the possibility of

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[331] And I have formed a fairly accurate picture in my mind of the type of men who call me paedophile, disgusting, faggot, etc.: I do not care about their opinion.
[332] I am highly unconvinced the law prohibits 'invisible' intent to experience self-pleasure by simply being naked, where no victims or threatening/sexual behaviours are involved.

sexual intent – otherwise, why would I be naked? Thus, the police officer threatened to arrest me so that my 'real' intent could be assessed in a formal interview at the police station. A second officer arrived and agreed with his colleague. Eventually, they let me go – supposedly because no one had complained about my nudity[333].

Still, this episode has left me somewhat shaken. What is the point of a law protecting my right to be naked, if the mere rarity of anyone exercising this right is enough to suggest to the police that there may be *some* criminal intent? This situation raises important questions on the relations between State law and cultural norms. If I am serious about maximizing the freedom to be naked that the law ostensibly protects, clearly, I must be prepared to face arrests, spend time in police stations, and possibly go to prison. I am no longer afraid of going to prison, but is fighting for freedom truly worthwhile, or is quiet compliance with the order a wiser choice?

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[333] If the police needed a complainant, they could have spoken to the car driver who had been yelling 'Faggot! Faggot!' at me just moments before. He might have accused me of trying to rape him – and the police officer could then have arrested me for 'intending to rape a morally-straight, heterosexual car driver while riding my bicycle on the other side of the road'.

Post-postscript

Two weeks after the unpleasant encounter with the police I described in the Postscript, a worse incident happened to me. I participated in a World Naked Bike Ride event in Portsmouth, England. In fact, I was one of the event marshals, helping to ensure everyone's safety. At one point, we rode through a street where crowds were gathering and drinking after the conclusion of a local Travellers' festival, the Wickham horse fair. The fair is a place for the travelling community to sell and race ponies and horses, and many had come to central Portsmouth with their ponies (and whips).

As we passed the bars where they were congregating, our nudity triggered their anger. Dozens of people attacked us. It began as verbal abuse, then they threw their beers at us, and finally they advanced aggressively towards us. The other naked cyclists managed to escape, but I was the last rider at the back of the group, and I could not get away. Someone whipped me with his horsewhip (Fig. 32). A mob quickly surrounded me. Someone pushed me off my bike. Then people started kicking me. Others joined him by throwing things at me, and more people joined the kicking. I was hit everywhere. Eventually, a woman intervened and managed to get me away from the mob. I was handed over to a police officer.

I later found that the attack had been filmed and a video posted on X (Twitter), under the title: 'British patriots don't like naked men on bicycles'[334].

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[334] https://x.com/RadioGenoa/status/1795534047567097924?s=08

Fig. 32 The attack begins.
Whipped by the guy in yellow while the guy in
white throws beer at me.

Fig. 33 The kicking begins.

Fig. 34 More kicking.

Fig. 35 Even more kicking.

Fig. 36 Rescued, at last

The police officer, PCSO Steve Hull, showed no interest in the violence I had suffered. Instead, he accused me of committing a crime of public indecency by being naked in public. He refused to believe I had been participating in a World Naked Bike Ride event that had been authorized by the police, nor did he believe the official police guidance (Appendix A) explaining officers that non-sexual, passive public nudity is lawful. He felt the violent reaction to my public nudity was understandable, considering the need to protect any 'children' from being exposed to nudity. Instead of identifying those who had attacked me, he took *my* details. As usual, my naked body was seen as the problem, rather than the mob that assaulted me. The officer later wrote in his police report that he tried to explain to me that:

> 'it is not acceptable to be riding around Southsea naked, on a busy and sunny Saturday afternoon when there are a lot of children and vulnerable people around'[335].

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[335] Hampshire Constabulary report HC-01-ROA-24-019225-Y.

I still have no idea how a World Naked Bike Ride event – or *any* simple, passive nudity – negatively affects 'children and vulnerable people' to the point of being 'unacceptable'. My experiences suggest that adult men (especially if lower-class and with big muscles) are the social group most negatively affected by nudity – not children or other vulnerable people. Anyway, I didn't suffer major injuries, although I had ringing in my right ear from the kicks received, which lasted a few weeks. Aside from that, I was covered in bruises, minor cuts, and whip marks (Fig. 37). It could have been much worse.

Fig. 37 Whip marks.

The X (Twitter) video of my attack has received 12,000 'likes' and around a thousand comments. It has been re-tweeted 1,800 times. Although it should be considered that the video was posted by a right-wing account, the comments were overwhelmingly supportive of my attackers. Here are a few examples to give a sense of the tone:

'pervert pedophile'
'humiliate these shameless creature'
'So disgusting'
'Bloody perv, deserved every last one of those kicks up the arse'
'Get degenerate perverts off our streets!'
'Absolutely disgusting, dirty scum, bollocko in public. Well done British lads for dealing with this scum swiftly. Proper men'
'It's wrong with innocent kids walking around.'
'Serves the pervert right. Treated too lenient in my opinion. Kids around don't need to see this sick shit.'
'They're pedos hoping to see children.'

'dirty fucking perv'

'Nobody wants to be forced to witness that naked person on a bicycle.'

'Sue for child molestation'

'What is the child seat for???????? the guy is a pedo 100%'

'Perfect. Thank you for protecting our kids'

'No society should tolerate depravity'

'Nice but not enough'

'Not enough violence.'

One user commenting on the video of my beating suggested reintroducing lynchings to deal with people like me. Sadly, this experience may have put an end to my activism. The fight against the exclusion, prohibition, shame, and fear of my naked body is not worth the very real physical and emotional risks involved.

And perhaps, it may also mean that the project of posthumanist freedom is unrealistic because humans are pack animals, and so to openly embrace difference – whether as an individual or in small groups – is to risk becoming a sacrificial victim to the violence of the pack.

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Appendix A:

College of Policing

Briefing note
Public nudity advice and decision aid

Naturism is defined by British Naturism as a 'philosophical belief in a natural, naked lifestyle wherein persons espouse nudity as part or possibly all of their lifestyle'. While many confine their activities to their own private property or in clubs, many use beaches which are known as 'naturist beaches'. Others engage in rambling in country areas and national parks, leisure areas and public spaces. There is no legal power to designate particular areas or otherwise.

Naturists have a right to freedom of expression which only engages criminal law if they commit sexual offences or use disorderly behaviour that they intend to or are aware may be disorderly within the hearing or sight of a person likely to be caused harassment, alarm or distress.

Although officers should consider every situation according to its own circumstances, forces should adopt a consistent approach to naturism to maintain public confidence in the police and to avoid the inappropriate use of police powers.

At the time that the **Sexual Offences Act 2003** was debated in Parliament, care was taken to word the legislation in a way specifically intended to avoid it impinging on the rights and activities of naturists. Consequently, the Act requires that a sexual offence dimension would need to be involved for public nudity to constitute the offence of exposure under **section 66** the Act. This would involve deliberately exposing genitalia towards another person with the intention of them seeing and being caused alarm or distress (sometimes referred to as indecent exposure).

The common law offence of outraging public decency applies when a person's behaviour is so lewd, obscene or disgusting as to shock a reasonable person. This has a high threshold in law that simple public nudity would not reach.

A naturist whose intention is limited to going about their lawful business while naked will not be guilty of either of these sexual offences.

In some other cases, the conduct may be seen as (at most) amounting to an offence under the **Public Order Act 1986** (POA) of using disorderly behaviour. This requires that a person needs to have used disorderly behaviour within the hearing or sight of a person likely to be caused harassment, alarm or distress. An act of public nudity is unlikely to constitute this offence unless members of the public were caused actual harassment, alarm or distress (as opposed to considering the likelihood of this happening or the complainant personally finding nudity distasteful or offensive).

The Crown Prosecution Service has produced guidance to prosecutors titled **Nudity in Public – Guidance on handling cases of Naturism**. The guidance makes it clear that prosecution will normally only be considered for a POA offence if a substantive offence has been committed and the public interest test is met. This test will be based on proportionality to the seriousness of the incident and the likely level of sanction, recognising that it is a summary only offence with no prison sentence available. Additionally, in recent years attempted prosecutions of naturists have all failed.

In deciding what action to take, officers need to also consider that any arrest, while unlikely to lead to prosecution, will result in a PND entry which is more likely to be disclosed in enhanced DBS (Disclosure and Barring Service) checks and have a lasting impact on the individual and their career. This is an important factor to consider in terms of the proportionality of the police response.

In the lawful situation where there is an absence of any sexual context in relation to nudity and where the person does not intend the behaviour to be, and is not aware that it may be disorderly, it will not be appropriate to take any police action. The following decision aid may assist in determining the most appropriate and lawful response to a reported incident.

Officers and staff receiving reports need to avoid their personal views on public nudity affecting their decision making, which must be based on the legal framework that exists.

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Decision aid for responding officers

Is there a clear sexual motivation to the subject's actions?

No

Yes

Has the person been 'disorderly' and caused another person 'actual' harassment, alarm or distress (as opposed to considering the likelihood of this or the complainant finding it personally distasteful or offensive)?

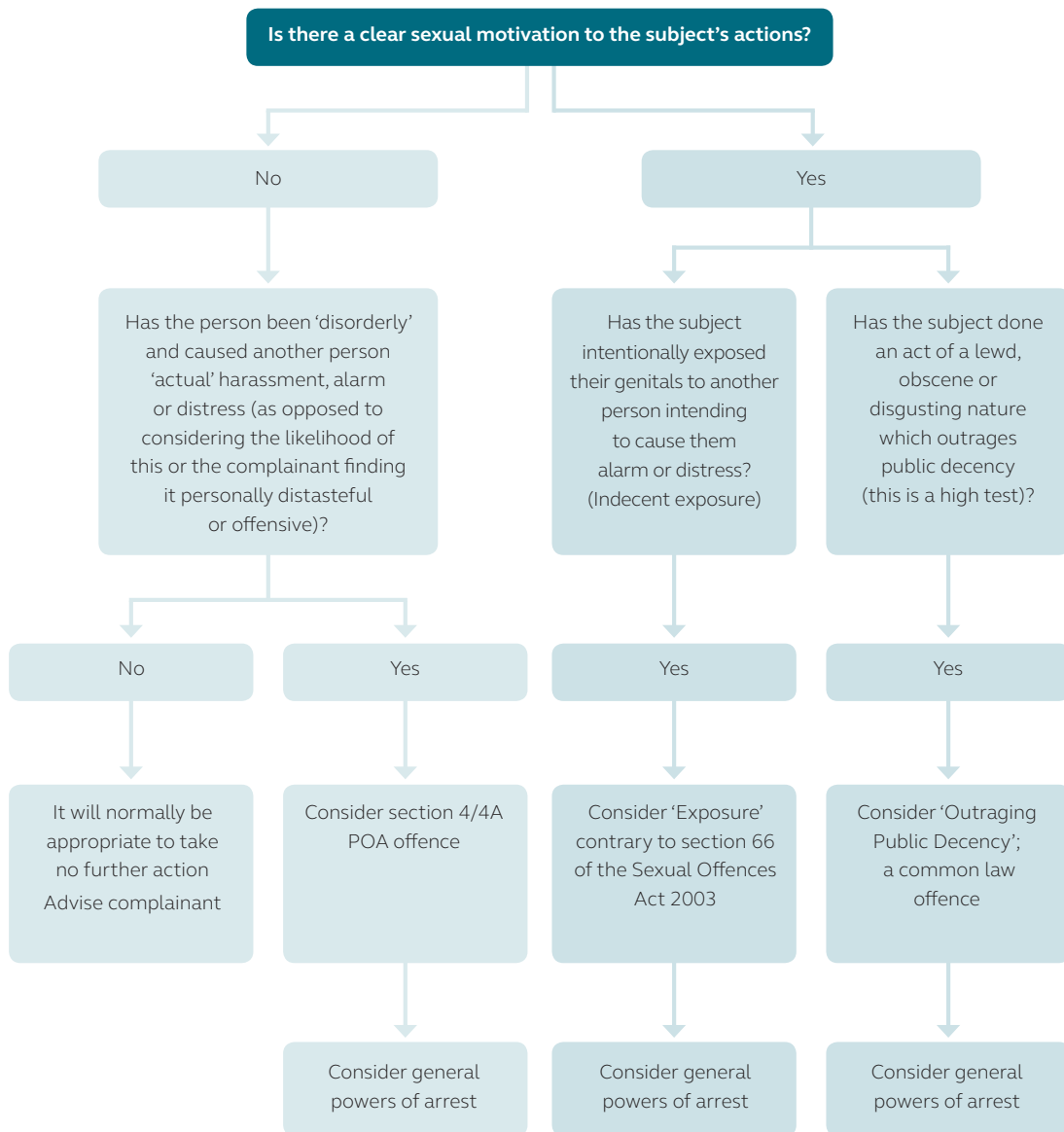Has the subject intentionally exposed their genitals to another person intending to cause them alarm or distress? (Indecent exposure)

Has the subject done an act of a lewd, obscene or disgusting nature which outrages public decency (this is a high test)?

No

Yes

Yes

Yes

It will normally be appropriate to take no further action
Advise complainant

Consider section 4/4A POA offence

Consider 'Exposure' contrary to section 66 of the Sexual Offences Act 2003

Consider 'Outraging Public Decency'; a common law offence

Consider general powers of arrest

Consider general powers of arrest

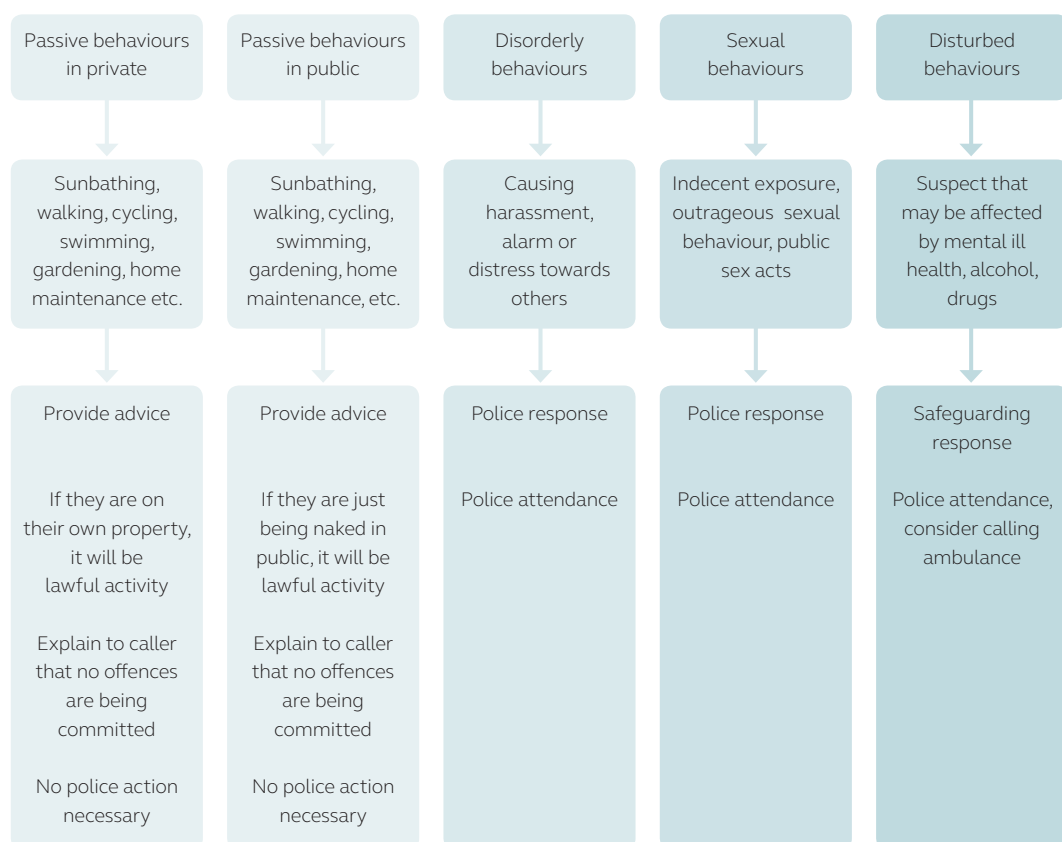Consider general powers of arrest

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Decision aid for call handlers

Question to ask of someone reporting public nudity:

- Is the person in a place where there are other people?
- Are they in their own home or garden?
- What is the person doing?
- Are they doing something sexual or are they just naked?
- Did the person see you?
- Did they say or do anything towards you (like exposing themselves)?
- Do they seem to be unwell, or under the influence of drink or drugs?

Behaviour described by caller

Passive behaviours in private	Passive behaviours in public	Disorderly behaviours	Sexual behaviours	Disturbed behaviours
Sunbathing, walking, cycling, swimming, gardening, home maintenance etc.	Sunbathing, walking, cycling, swimming, gardening, home maintenance, etc.	Causing harassment, alarm or distress towards others	Indecent exposure, outrageous sexual behaviour, public sex acts	Suspect that may be affected by mental ill health, alcohol, drugs
Provide advice If they are on their own property, it will be lawful activity Explain to caller that no offences are being committed No police action necessary	Provide advice If they are just being naked in public, it will be lawful activity Explain to caller that no offences are being committed No police action necessary	Police response Police attendance	Police response Police attendance	Safeguarding response Police attendance, consider calling ambulance

See also the UK Crown Prosecution Service's Guidance on handling cases of public nudity at: https://www.cps.gov.uk/legal-guidance/nudity-public-guidance-handling-cases-naturism