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Cultures of Hygiene

Research Blog on the Role of Bodily Hygiene, Hand Sanitizers and Smell during the COVID-19 Pandemic in Germany and Turkey

The smell of Covid-19: notes from Berlin during the lockdown

Shortly before the beginning of the Coronavirus lockdowns, I embarked on a new project on the social and cultural configurations of smell. While originally, I planned to focus on perfuming and deodorising in relation to cultural notions of beauty, what came to the fore in both my everyday life and the scholarly literature that I read, was the smell of hygiene – subsequently giving rise to a new research focus and the name of this blog. In this post, I would like to assemble a few research notes and

observations on smell in coronatimes and my changing smellscape, living in Berlin during the Covid-19 lockdown. Does the pandemic smell, and how? What are the olfactorial shifts that I noted? In writing about these things, I also grapple with another question, perhaps the most difficult of all, namely, how to write about and record smell and odours?

Smell is ephemeral and cannot be recorded like sound or vision. Moreover, the language we have to describe smell is rather poor. Reading on the role of smell and odours in medical history and history more generally, as I currently do, I cannot help but think that over the past century or two our capability to detect and articulate odours has become even poorer. Not least, I'm certainly not 'a nose' (*un nez* in French), as they say in the French perfumery industry studied by Bruno Latour for [an article published in 2004](#). That is, like most of us, I've never been systematically trained and educated in detecting, articulating or creating odours and scents respectively.

One of the first things that come to my mind when thinking about the relation between smell and Covid-19 is the relation between smell and the virus itself. Thus, a loss or a changed sense of smell is one of the effects of the coronavirus, as noted by the World Health Organisation. Rather late, on May 18, the British NHS officially added the loss or changed sense of smell to its list of coronavirus symptoms. [Here](#), the loss of smell is described as 'unpleasant,' though usually 'not serious;' nevertheless, the experiences of those suffering from this loss, called anosmia, speak of a serious irritation. The olfactorial power of the virus, however, is twofold: what is less widely known is that the virus also produces a particular kind of smell. While this smell is undetectable for humans, even 'the noses' described by Latour, in the past few weeks, dogs trained by researchers at the [University of Helsinki](#) have succeeded in sniffing out Covid-19 patients by distinguishing between different urine samples.



Blossoming cherry tree along the canal in Treptow donated from Japan in 1990 (photo: C. Liebelt)

Moreover, there are changes in the urban smellscape that are related to the Covid-19 shutdown rather than the virus itself. No longer taking the subway to the university or squeezing into the bus to take my daughter to school in the mornings, my personal everyday smellscape has certainly changed quite dramatically in the past few months. Staying at home most days and keeping physical distance while shopping, I'm hardly ever confronted with the bodily smells of others from close up. Moreover, in the first few weeks, with traffic in the neighbourhood coming almost to a standstill, there was an incredible improvement in the air quality that could not only be heard, but also smelled. Thus, I wonder whether the dramatic [change in the urban soundscape](#) during the shutdown –chirping birds, rather than traffic– contributed to a general intensification of attentiveness and sensorial experiences such as the olfactorial, reported by many of my interlocutors and experienced myself?

The period of shutdowns also coincided with the arrival of spring in Berlin and during April and May, intensive musky and floral scents were carried through the air. Not far from where I live, the 45 cherry trees planted in 1990 along the former border between East and West Berlin by a Japanese TV channel as part of the so-

called [Sakura Campaign](#) to mark the reunification of Germany started blossoming and I walked there almost daily to indulge in this visual and olfactorial spectacle.



Unbranded hand sanitizer in a restaurant in Berlin-Charlottenburg in mid-May (photo: C. Liebelt)

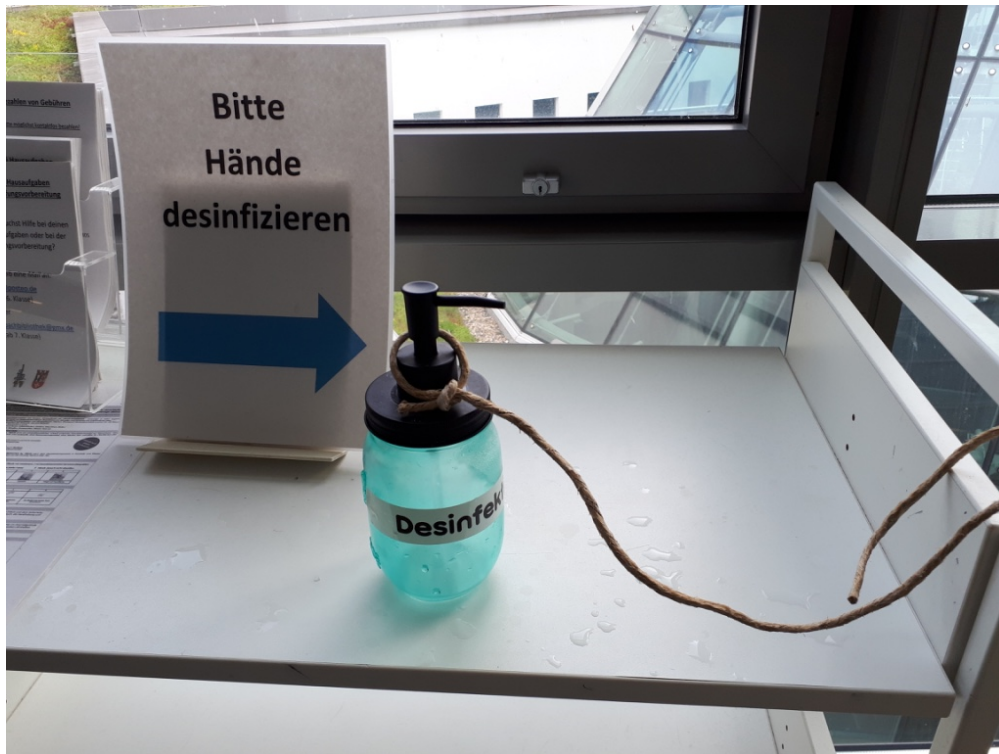
A novel smell that came to dominate the smellscape of our apartment building and indeed, of many public and commercial buildings, is the smell of cleaning and sanitizing agents. In mid-March, in the beginning of the lockdown in Berlin, one of our neighbours used an extensive amount of sanitizing agent to disinfect the staircase and door knobs. Its acid smell continued to waft in the building for days. In the weeks that followed, I heard and smelled a lot of cleaning going on in our neighbours' apartments. Similar to what has been reported for the epidemics of the 19th and 20th century (as described, for example, in Corbin's masterful *The Foul and the Fragrant*) in confronting the pandemic, many of our neighbours obviously resorted to purifying and deodorizing their private spaces.



Newly discovered imported tobacco-scented Eau de Cologne from our Turkish corner shop (photo: C. Liebelt)

Now was the time to take stock of the hand sanitizers that we had at home: there was one in the car, an antiseptic in the bathroom, a couple of Sagrotan® cloths in the medicine cabinet.. To my taste, they all smelled rather horrid. I wondered, will their olfactorial attack on my nose affect my ability to smell? While ‘medical’ disinfectants were sold out almost everywhere, they nevertheless became ubiquitous, especially in their acrid olfactorial presence. Friends, who had rarely ever used hand sanitizers before, now carried them along in their handbags and increasingly used them. Many Turkish friends used traditional Eau de Cologne, rediscovered in Turkey as hand sanitizer due to its high alcohol content. Even my partner acquired a tobacco-scented Eau de Cologne, the classical *kolonya* used during his teenage years in Istanbul, from our Turkish corner shop. Another friend, whom I met for occasional walks around the block, used lemon-scented spectacle cloths to sanitise her hands. After mid-May, cafés and restaurants, offices, museums, libraries and even swimming pools and sport and fitness clubs reopened, given their so-called ‘hygiene plans’ had been approved by the municipality. Hand

sanitizers for employees and customers/ visitors formed an important part of these. Again, I noted that many Turkish-owned cafés and restaurants use scented *kolonya* instead of ‘medical’ hand sanitizers, creating a different olfactorial atmosphere altogether.



Hand sanitizer offered at the entrance of the municipal library in Berlin-Neukölln; the sign reads ‘Please disinfect your hands’ (photo: C. Liebelt)

Now that we enter month four of the Covid-19 lockdown in Berlin, things are slowly returning to a fragile and different kind of normal everyday life. Cars and buses are back in the streets and with them, traffic emissions and exhaust smell. However, the smell of cleaning and sanitizing agents, I suppose, will stay with us for quite another while.



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