

# Milk and manure: Dairy farmers as social psychologists

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In *Purity and Danger*, a classic book on social anthropology published in 1963, Mary Douglas points out how distinctions in many societies between “clean” and “unclean” are really about what is considered out of place. And these boundaries – like borders between countries – can be quite arbitrary.

Some cultures define particular animals as unclean, whereas others claim these same animals as clean. Similarly, some groups of people are stigmatized as “unclean,” and some jobs are cast as “dirty work.” Groups that carry out duties involving bodily functions – often women and the lower classes – are among those most commonly stigmatized as “unclean.”

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Douglas, along with psychologists from William James to Sigmund Freud, explains that this clean/unclean boundary involves how people draw protective boundaries in areas of life that arouse discomfort.

In declaring people or places as unclean, there is a moral judgment over who or what belongs within the social order. Many politicians enlist these same images in declaring themselves the guardians of social purity, protecting the citizenry from dangerous or corrupting elements.

In a way, dairy farmers are similar to social psychologists in that they are often in a position to help people think about areas of life that make them uncomfortable. They work at the same cultural borders described by Mary Douglas in producing two very important products: milk and manure. The marketing side of dairying emphasizes the purity side of the equation – how milk is the purest of foods – but producers deal with a more complex reality.

Modern dairy cows produce a lot of milk, but they also produce a lot of manure. And the “dirty” side of dairying has been an area closed out of public consciousness for much of the past century, overtaken by the marketing preferences for romanticized images of what one farmer described to me as “air-brushed images” of cows.

In carrying out background research for my latest documentary, *Milk Men: The Life and Times of Dairy Farmers*, I was fascinated by a 1918 column from the *Traralgon Record*, a news magazine that was very popular a century ago in Australia’s dairy country.

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The column drew on a famous quote attributed to the 19th century founder of American psychology, William James. Echoing James, the columnist declares that, “Dirt is simply matter in the wrong place.” The columnist explains the relevance of this idea to raising animals for food production: “Mud on the farm, manure on the farm, is not dirt.

It is well to keep it out of the drawing room, but on the farm it is the furniture. I don't think it right to degrade farm work by calling it dirty work.” The author goes on to add – in an era when the vote for women was being hotly debated – that women's work, like farm work, tends to be devalued as dirty work.

Adding a pitch for the suffragists, the author proclaims, “If the last century discovered what the child could do, the 20th century has discovered woman and her value” (Trove, National Library of Australia).

The distinction between purity and danger carries a practical history, of course, as well as a history centered on the marking of social boundaries. In the 19th century, many children died of contaminated cows' milk before advances in microbiology and the development of processing techniques for cooling fresh milk.

Indeed, pasteurization was among the most important public health developments of the modern era. But post-World War II advertising oversold cleanliness, portraying housewives as engaged in perpetual warfare against germs.

Modern advertising continues to promote associations between cleanliness and middle-class propriety, with cleaning agents to sanitize every crook and cranny of the human body and family household.

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Spring cleaning was once just that – an annual scrubbing of cupboards, carpets and floors. But in the television and advertising culture of the post-war era, cleaning was portrayed as a never-ending job for good mothers.

Paradoxically, the epidemic in allergies in the late 20th century has been associated with the overuse of anti-bacterial agents. Too much cleanliness can, as it turns out, make a person very sick.

In filming *Milk Men*, I spoke with farmers about challenging this cultural border between clean and unclean, and their potential role in helping the public overcome cultural phobias about mud and manure. On the promising side, recent years have witnessed profound shifts in public understandings of what constitutes “waste.” Indeed, progress in a society may be best measured by how it handles its waste – and what is considered refuse.

On this frontier, dairy farmers – like the *Traralgon Record* columnist of a century ago – have a great deal to teach the public.

At public screenings of *Milk Men*, farmers have voiced concern that exposing the everyday presence of mud and manure on dairies might be bad for business. But in the discussion that follows, we talk about problems that have come with dairy marketing.

The reliance on pictures of airbrushed cows – just like the airbrushed images of flawless female bodies in fashion ads – has come at a great cost. One cost is loss of touch with reality – disconnection from the imperfect and wonderfully messy aspects of life. The overselling of romanticized images also has created an opening for exposés – for groups claiming to show the “real” world of dairying.

Turning to that other famous psychologist interested in dirt, Sigmund Freud, we might learn from his adage that there is always a “return of the repressed” in areas of life that really matter to people. To the extent that the complexities of farming are “repressed” in the public imagination, they will return in some form or another.

My aim is that dairy farmers, like good therapists, can help people ground their fears and fantasies in the realities of an area of work that is far more complex – and more interesting – than the sanitized portraits that dairy ads would suggest. **PD**

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