The Pure and the Impure: Anthropological Approaches for the Study of the Ancient World[1]

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For cultural anthropologists, dealing with the categories of pure and impure is akin to opening a display case filled with family heirlooms. These categories have inspired classifications, conceptual distinctions, and passionate debates, which have contributed to the establishment of anthropology as an autonomous discipline in the latter half of the nineteenth century. My aim is not to provide a comprehensive review of anthropology's contributions to the history of this complex theme, but rather to highlight specific inquiries that have opened up interdisciplinary perspectives[2].

Already laden with history in linguistic and historical-religious circles, the categories of pure and impure entered anthropological discourse in the nineteenth century alongside new, curious, and exotic terms gathered from regions of the world colonized by European nations. Words such as the Polynesian '*tabu*', the Melanesian '*mana*', and the Algonquin Native American word '*totem*' – to name just a few of the most well-known ones – have become part of our non-scientific lexicon. We

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[1] The topics covered in this article were the focus of my presentation at the international conference "Hagnos, Miasma and Katharsis. Journey between the categories of pure and impure in the imaginary of the Ancient World" (2016), organized by the University of Cagliari in collaboration with the University of Grenobe-Alpes. An Italian version of this article was published in the journal "Otium", 2,2 (2017): https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.5512488

[2] I will not refer to the anthropological approaches related to Indological studies, Oriental studies, and sacred texts, as they deserve separate reflections.

might also add the Iroquois term *'orénda'*, the Algonquin *'manitu'*, and the Sioux *'wakan tanka'*, all of which have long shaped the scholarly and intellectual imagination, influencing studies of the distant past, including those pertaining to prehistory and the ancient world.

Some of these expressions, whose semantic value has often been misunderstood through the conflation of heterogeneous phenomena within the ethnographic contexts in which they were in use, were employed by scholars in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (from James Frederick McLennan to James George Frazer) to formulate generalizations and create successful new historical-religious categories. Terms such as 'totemism' and 'taboo' have been identified as institutions and beliefs representing a universal form of religion characterized as 'primitive,' original, or minimal. These concepts correspond to an evolutionary stage described as animistic (by Edward Burnett Tylor), pre-animistic (by John Henry King and Robert Ranulph Marett), or based on magical thinking (by J. G. Frazer).

The term 'taboo', introduced in the latter half of the eighteenth century by Captain James Cook in his accounts of his expeditions in the Polynesian archipelago, for example, was used by the natives to refer to the prohibitions that governed the meals of chiefs as opposed to the common people. However, during the Victorian era, it was soon adopted as a category to indicate a system of restrictions and prohibitions in 'primitive' societies regarding what was deemed sacred, corrupt, or impure.

By unhesitatingly associating the notion of 'taboo' with the concepts of 'sacred' and 'accursed', as well as 'clean' and 'unclean', J. G. Frazer expanded its meaning by employing categories and interpretive tools that played a significant role in European studies of the history of religions to define the thought of the 'primitives'. The rules of ceremonial purity observed by divine kings, leaders, and priests – intended to preserve their *mana* – appeared to parallel those imposed by murderers, new mothers, and hunters, revealing no moral distinction among these individuals. This observation led Frazer and others to attribute a lack of differentiation between the sacred and the impure to primitive societies, suggesting an inherent confusion among moral, spiritual, and material conditions,

ultimately blurring the lines between norms of sanctity and rules of contamination[3].

Consequently, discussions of purity and impurity emerged within anthropological debates framed from an evolutionary perspective, which sought to understand the origins of religion and perceived history as a linear progression from savagery to civilization. This viewpoint was accompanied by a nearly binary distinction between the so-called 'primitives' – as subjects of anthropological study – and the 'civilized'.

With the advent of the French sociological school, particularly through Émile Durkheim's studies on the elementary forms of religious life, the binary of pure and impure was situated within the distinction between the 'sacred' and the 'profane.' These two macro categories selected by Durkheim as discriminating aspects of the religious phenomenon produced by social life, suggest that the pure and the impure are two varieties of the same kind, encompassing all things sacred and 'separated' by prohibitions or taboos. For Durkheim, the sacred possesses a normative function within the collective organization of human relationships. It exerts both attractive and repellent forces, can embody prosperity or adversity, and may be classified as pure or impure. Notably, a single object can transition between these various types of the sacred without undergoing a change in its essential nature: the pure can make the impure, and conversely, while, on occasion, the impure can serve a sanctifying role. Sacred objects are, in themselves, indifferent and historically variable; it is the community that ascribes to them their sacredness. However, they belong to a domain that is distinct from the profane realm, characterized by a system of prohibitions and rituals, although the two worlds are not impermeable to one another (Durkheim 1982: 431-434; cf. Rosati 2002).

In these reflections, which exhibit the influence of the semitist William Robertson Smith and the ancient historian Numa Denis Fustel de

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[3] Frazer 1888; 1905; 1911; Robertson Smith 1889; cfr. Steiner 1956; Valeri 1999: 61 ss.; Pignato 2001: 90 ss.; Santi 2011: 56 ss.; Frevel, Nihan 2013: 3 ss. Regarding the reason why the translation of the Polynesian *tapu* as 'sacred' or 'forbidden' is misleading, see Keesing 1985. The spread of the notion of *tabu* in Europe was also influenced in the early 20th century by Sigmund Freud with his work *Totem und tabu* (1913).

Coulanges, Durkheim provided a unified interpretation of the religious phenomenon. This interpretation acknowledges the diversity of its manifestations among different human groups across time and space, conceptualizing religion as a social fact – an ensemble of practices and representations generated by the social group.

Durkheim's attention to the social nature of the sacred/profane categories was accompanied by an acknowledgment of their complexity (cf. Comba 2008). He distinguished religion from magic, as prohibitions in the former are regarded as 'categorical imperatives' with material and, especially, moral consequences for the transgressor. In contrast, in the latter, prohibitions are seen as useful norms associated with danger, whose violation results in mere material consequences. According to Durkheim, this concept refers to the earliest forms of hygienic and sanitary prohibitions (Durkheim 1982: 317).

The religious polarity of the sacred/profane also underpins the dualism of purity/impurity, as noted by the Durkheimian scholar Robert Hertz, who sought to demonstrate how such dichotomous classification schemes were fundamental to the ways in which primitive peoples thought about and organized their universe, society, and the human body. They perceive these distinctions as both natural and transcendent, and through them, they construct every social hierarchy (Hertz 1994; cf. Mattalucci 2000).

The approach of the French sociological school has variably influenced scholars of the history of religions and the ancient world, from Jane Harrison to Walter Burkert, Marcel Granet, and Louis Gernet (cf. Segal 1999; Arrigoni 2003: 47 ss.; Di Donato 1980, 1990; Humphreys 2004), to name just a few, and it remains a subject of reinterpretation and continuous critical contributions today. The idea that behind the dualism of pure/impure and sacred/profane lies a cosmology and a classification system produced by society is a theme revisited, among others, by the anthropologist Mary Douglas within a structuralist and symbolic perspective.

In her work *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (1966), Douglas shifts the focus to the forms of classification of reality, conceived as a construction of a social idea of order. By extending

the category of contamination to encompass dirt and disorder, she attempts to demonstrate, on one hand, the relativity of these concepts, and on the other, their common functionality in the organization of experience and the environment[4]: order implies selection whereas disorder is limitless. From disorder, infinite patterns can emerge; therefore, although it is dangerous and destructive to the existing social model, disorder possesses potential and simultaneously symbolizes both danger and power. For Douglas, disorder is associated with the idea of contamination, which is never an isolated event; it can only occur in reference to a systematic conceptual framework. It represents a special category of danger concerning phenomena that are disordered, anomalous, marginal, and ambiguous (Douglas 1966: 94-113).

A critique of this general thesis, which is primarily structured in taxonomic terms in *Purity and Danger*, has been put forward by the anthropologist Valerio Valeri. According to Valeri, classifications reflect a normative and moral impulse, related to normative ideals arising from concrete social evaluations rather than from an abstract cognitive function (Valeri 1999: 112). He considered it a mistake to postulate that there exists, in every society, a single, all-encompassing classification detached from context. In fact, classifications would vary in form and rigidity based on the purposes for which they are created. This is also true for the notion of contamination, which, Valeri contends, has a relational character, connected to subject's position within the classification[5]: «What is contaminating for some is not so for others, and what is contaminating in one time and place may not be so in another time and place» (Valeri 1999: 98 ss.; cf. Petrovic, Petrovic 2016). Consequently, disorder cannot be seen as the residue of an ordering process or a classificatory system; rather, it constitutes a violation of a system of specific compatibilities and incompatibilities. In this way, Valeri highlights the role of the subject and

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[4] «For I believe that ideas about separating, purifying, demarcating and punishing transgressions have as their main function to impose system on an inherently untidy experience» (Douglas 1966: 4).

[5] This is a central idea of Valeri that he elaborated in his analysis of the sacrificial rite; see Ghiaroni 2005.

the relevance of context, adopting a relational and dynamic interpretative approach.

In the 1960s, one of Douglas's goals was to demonstrate that it was incorrect to assume that the ideas of indigenous peoples regarding contamination lacked any ethical or religious content. Such a conception was present in Robertson Smith, propagated by Frazer, and reiterated by Durkheim, leading to the consideration of the laws regulating impurity as either irrational or purely utilitarian, and in any case, distant from true religion. (Douglas 1966: 7-28).

In the scientific domain, the outcome was the establishment of a specific category for magical rituals, distinct from the field of religion (Douglas 1966: 129-139). The significance of this issue is considerable and has influenced studies of the ancient world. Notably, it was already addressed in the 1950s by Jean-Pierre Vernant in a review article published in the *Année sociologique*. In that work, Vernant conducted a rigorous analysis of the arguments presented in *Le pur et l'impur dans la pensée des Grecs d'Homère à Aristote* by Louis Moulinier. In his examination of the notions of purity and impurity in ancient Greece through literary sources, Moulinier argued that impurity in the Homeric poems had a predominantly positive aspect, asserting that the pursuit of cleanliness reflected a solely hygienic concern. In contrast, Vernant highlighted the relativity of the concept of dirt and insisted on the symbolic nature of impurity, even in the case of "physical" dirt itself (at least in the sense of Homer and Hesiod); thus, impurity should be placed within a broader system of thought, within a specific religious order of the world[6].

Among the scholars of the ancient world who explicitly draw on the approaches of Douglas and Durkheim, as well as the folklorist Arnold Van Gennep and the social anthropologist Victor Turner, we can mention Robert Parker (1983: 59 ss.). In his work *Miasma: Pollution and Purification in Early Greek Religion*, Parker aimed to demonstrate, on the basis of historical-anthropological considerations and a study of the ritual

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[6] «Louis Moulinier reasons as if dirt were a property of certain things, a kind of absolute quality whose evidence would impose itself in every circumstance. Blood and dust would be considered dirty; yet they are not always so» (Vernant 1981: 124-125).

representations and practices described in various types of ancient sources, how purification rituals in ancient Greece had an essentially ordering nature and served as an important element of both physical and symbolic separation, delimiting the sacred from the profane (Parker 1983: 18 ss).

Nevertheless, working with ethnographic material derived from field research, as well as with the variety and selectivity of data and information offered by ancient written sources, is not straightforward. The risk of proposing simplistic parallels and comparisons, or of employing static models and predefined categories in the study of the ways of life of human groups and societies belonging to very different times and places, is always present. Thus, while the scholar of the ancient world and, more broadly, of the human sciences requires concepts and categories that assist in the processes of theorization, there is also the danger of simplifications and reductionisms that could obscure the complexity and dynamism of socio-cultural phenomena.

To understand how challenging, albeit not fruitless, this task is, it suffices to consider the extensive, now centuries-old literature pertaining to the dimension of ritual, as well as the various attempts to formulate a general theory of it. Scholars have sought to comprehend the functions, meanings, and efficacy of ritual action through functionalist, structuralist, symbolic, semiotic, and cognitive approaches, leading to a disjunction of the notion of ritual from those of the sacred and the profane, as well as a questioning of the very category of ritual (cf. Scarduelli 2000; Lattanzi 2000; Ciattini 2007).

Theoretical and methodological approaches, such as those proposed by Arnold Van Gennep (1909), Victor Turner (1969, 1986), Ernesto de Martino (1958, 1962, 1977), Valerio Valeri (1985, 1999), Roy A. Rappaport (1999), and Stanley J. Tambiah (2000) – to cite but a few – have significantly expanded the perspectives and tools available for research in the study of ritual, leading to more fruitful outcomes in studies of the past. This is especially true when these approaches are integrated with the analysis of various documentary sources and enhanced by the contributions of different specialists, which are essential for reconstructing historical, social, linguistic, and cultural contexts.

A theoretical perspective that has found particular development in anthropological studies and that offers useful tools for a reflection on the use of the categories of pure and impure is the one that refers to the notions of liminality and border. It is based on the general meaning of the 'limit' as the founder of difference (Raffestin 1987). Spatial, social and symbolic border, and as such also a social device of inclusion and exclusion, the limit is inherent in the construction of belongings, it is a marker of identity, and also the place of their redefinition (cf. Fabietti 1995, 2005; Salvatici 2005; Viazzo 2007).

To this broad field of inquiry, one can associate, in addition to the aforementioned studies on ritual action, those that focus on processes of change from an increasingly dynamic anthropological perspective, as well as studies that share an anthropo-poietic perspective[7]. The former particularly includes investigations that have revealed the ways in which identity, ethnicity, authenticity, autochthony, and tradition are constructed[8]. A significant contribution was offered by the Norwegian anthropologist Fredrik Barth in the 1960s, who developed an anti-essentialist conception of identity and ethnicity. This conception reveals the relationships and power disparities linked to the cultural processes of constructing difference and ethnic borders (Barth 1969; cf. Pusceddu 2005). This approach, applied to social realities in which the categories of pure and impure are used, or in which their use is intensified, can prove useful for understanding how such categories are variously used as operators of essentialisms and in the naturalization of differences of lineage, gender, ethnicity and caste, ultimately attributable to differences in power and unequal distributions of material and symbolic resources (Hartog 2002; cf. Fabietti 2005).

A pertinent example can be drawn from the ideological use of the myth of autochthony in ancient Greece. In particular, in Athens during the mid-fifth century, a political and ideological practice emerged based on the

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[7] Refer to the studies by Francesco Remotti, Claude Calame, Stefano Allovio, and others, especially Remotti 2002, 2013; Affergan et al. 2005, which includes an extensive bibliography.

[8] See, for example, Balandier 1971; Said 1978; Clifford 1988; Hobsbawm, Ranger 1983; Amselle 1990 and 2001; Bhabha 1994.

principle that political sovereignty was the exclusive prerogative of the "*ghenos katharos*" of the Athenians. This notion of purity of origins was obviously invented; however, it was around this idea that Athenian identity was shaped (Loraux 1996; Detienne 2005; Poddighe 2012).

The anthropo-poietic approach, in turn, adopts a constructivist paradigm, focusing on the practices that shape and mold humanity through constraints and pathways of a ritual and institutional nature. Drawing on the ancient theme of human incompleteness, which necessitates human intervention for social and cultural birth, this approach highlights the ideological components inherent in any anthropo-poietic process, as it involves the construction and invention of specific models of humanity, including the frequent disavowal of human responsibility and the attribution of anthropo-poiesis to 'others' (mythical ancestors, cultural heroes, deities, etc.) (Remotti 2013).

The emphasis on the ritual methods of human fabrication invites critical reflection on the Western elaboration of empirical and operational categories, such as 'rites of passage'. These can serve as valuable tools for analyzing themes of limits and liminality, the complementary concepts of sacrality and inviolability, and the processes of sacralization they imply, as well as their effectiveness in shaping individual and societal lives (Calame 2005: 167; Remotti 1993).

Declaring an impurity involves attributing meanings to a state of discomfort through the diagnosis of guilt or contamination. Has a taboo or prohibition been violated? Has a purity regulation been transgressed? Is an expiatory action necessary, and are purification rituals required, urging the community to obey the laws to avoid the same fate? For a long time, this was considered a peculiar aspect of the ancient world or of so-called 'primitive societies', now surpassed by the modern perspective along with its scientific and technological knowledge capable of preventing and tackling risks and dangers, identifying diseases, causes, and appropriate cures. Yet, in the face of a crisis, an epidemic, or the fear of danger, even contemporary communities and the institutions that control them often react by building barriers, erecting walls, and seeking out culprits to serve as scapegoats, accusing them of immoral behavior and of being potential carriers of disorder, disease, and contamination. Most often, it is the poor,

migrants, foreigners, deviants, and nomads who are blamed (cf. Douglas 1992; Dal Lago 1996; Ciavolella 2013). The discourses and practices related to the concepts of purity and contamination thus possess significant political implications; through them, one can uncover the power relations both within and between societies, as well as highlight the dynamics of dominance and power that are exerted over bodies, resulting in suffering and discrimination (Foucault 1977; Pizza 2005; Farmer 2005).

In a rapidly transforming and conflictual world, our discourses – featuring multiple critical approaches to the categories of the pure and the impure – also traverse time and lead us deep into the dynamics of contemporary social reality, into our imaginaries and fears, and into the essentialist rhetorics of belonging and their discriminatory practices.

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