

Clean-up Duty

by Theodore Dalrymple

The French government and the City of Paris disagree as to whether the city's public parks and gardens—169 of them—should be reopened or kept closed, the government favoring the latter and the city the former. I confess that I cannot see the logic of keeping them closed while shops, commercial centers, and narrow streets are open.

The government fears that, freed from restraint, people will behave irresponsibly, though most wouldn't, and the evidence in compliance with which the parks have been closed is, in any case, hardly indisputable. The city wants to open the parks gradually, which doesn't make much sense, either: surely dense crowds are less likely to gather if the maximum space is open to them?

For the moment, however, I must make do with walks in the streets and have decided to combine exercise with social duty, so I walk with my litter-picker, gathering the rubbish thrown by the curbside and into the bushes in front of apartment buildings.

"Chapeau!" (Bravo!) cried one woman from her balcony. A man driving by in an expensive black car was not as impressed: as he slowed to pass me, he looked at me as if I were an escapee from an asylum for criminal lunatics. I suspect that he was not very scrupulous about the disposal of his trash.

The work, or activity, is fascinating and not in itself unpleasant—provided that you have gloves. It gives an insight, if not into society exactly, at least into the way some people live. Every discarded piece of rubbish in the street or bushes was an act of disdain for, indifference or hostility toward,

society in general, to the public space. The sidewalk near my flat bears a stencilled slogan: *The street belongs to everyone*. That gives everyone the right, of course, to litter it.

During Covid-19, perhaps, it was only to be expected that people would throw their masks and gloves into the gutter once they had finished with them. There was, of course, the usual detritus of modern man's (and in particular, modern youth's) inability to go farther than a few hundred yards without refreshment by chocolate, soft drink, hamburger, beer, water, or sandwich: not an apple core or orange peel among them.

There were also the publicity flyers that we all received recently for plumbing services or free valuation of our properties—these went directly from mailbox into street. There were supermarket receipts, empty blister packs of pills (atorvastatin, hydroxychloroquine), disposable cigarette lighters, old CDs, discarded cartons of considerable size, and burnt-out joss sticks.

Of particular interest was the space between some bushes opposite my flat that I had cleared only the day before—it was now filled with crushed cans of 8.6 percent beer, packets of condoms, and three small bottles of methadone. How much goes on around us in the night that we are not aware of! Perhaps I should get some night-vision binoculars to examine further.

I should add, perhaps, that 20 square feet of flat around here cost about a year's median household income in France.

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