

Below Potsdamer Platz

Introduction to the Minus Area

“Jana in the underworld,” muses Norbert, a foreman with the major German cleaning company CleanUp,¹ when I tell him I will study cleaning work at Berlin’s Potsdamer Platz. For the cleaners, this large, four-level underworld is the nodal point of their work. Cleaners spend much of their time in what is also known as the “minus area”: windowless storage and break rooms, labyrinthine corridors, stairways and elevators that descend to the lowest point – garbage collection. In the underworld’s tunnels and interstices, cleaners move around and interact with fellow workers. This underworld is the setting for my ethnography of the cleaners’ largely invisible work life.

Norbert’s use of the metaphor “underworld” is apt, given its Greek-mythological origins. In the *κατω* [under] *κοσμο* [world], the god Hades, whose name means “the unseen” or “invisible,” rules over the dead.² Potsdamer Platz’s cleaners are far from dead, of course, and they regularly emerge aboveground. But the River Styx of concrete and steel keeps this underworld hidden.

Potsdamer Platz is a significant place for Berlin: a privately owned, corporate designer micro-city right in the city center, close to the Brandenburg Gate. Potsdamer Platz has become one of the iconic places seen in the background of tourist photos, advertisements and movie scenes depicting the “new Berlin.” The *crème de la crème* of international architects, funded by large corporations, rebuilt Potsdamer Platz to restore its prewar importance, overshadow its Nazi and Cold War past and create the ideal “city for the twenty-first century.”³ The skyscrapers of Renzo Piano, the redbrick Art-Deco-reminiscent tower of Hans Kollhoff and Richard Rogers’ glassy

¹ To ensure anonymity and protect sources, I use pseudonyms for CleanUp, its employees and all the other participants I encountered in the field.

² Hard (2004: 107).

³ <https://potsdamerplatz.de/en/mythos-potsdamer-platz/> (accessed June 2017).

complex with yellow blinds and green atria together make Potsdamer Platz a futuristic standout in the cityscape. With its Arkaden shopping mall, five-star American chain hotels, entertainment centers, casinos, cinema complexes and luxury apartments, Potsdamer Platz has become a hub for cosmopolitan residents, professionals, consumers and tourists.

On arriving at Potsdamer Platz, I enter both strangely familiar and unfamiliar worlds. Berlin-born and -raised, I've visited the complex many times; but I've known nothing about its corporate underworld and the people working there. Cleaning work is also new to me. Entering the underworld, therefore, feels like visiting a remote place in the middle of my native city.

An encounter more than fifteen years ago, during my work as a strategy consultant, helped spark my curiosity about cleaners and their work life. Responsible for a project's data calculations, I was spending a late night in the consultancy's Munich office. Around 9 p.m., the office became quiet. I could hear the last steps of departing colleagues, doors closing and the hallway lights automatically switching off. Absorbed in my spreadsheet, I was startled by the sudden presence of a young woman in a cleaning uniform. After a perfunctory greeting, she went to the next room to start cleaning. I found myself mulling our brief encounter. What was it like for her to clean the empty hallways and offices at night? What did she make of me, a lone female worker like her, yet dressed differently and engrossed in work with higher pay and status? Which one of us wanted less to be working here so late? When did she sleep and see her family? Did she have a family? Did she have children? Where did she live? How did she end up in cleaning?

Our encounter made me aware that the hotel bed I sleep in, the office I enter in the morning, the streets I walk to work, are all cleaned before and after me by the absent-present workers. They are present in that the absence of cleanliness would be noted and absent in that their presence is normally unheard, unseen and unfelt. So our lives are both intimately connected – the cleaner's work is scheduled around the consultant's – and kept separate. Until the moment I join the cleaning workforce and descend into the Potsdamer Platz underworld, cleaners have only entered my life when serving me.

Despite reading all I can about CleanUp, and speaking to foremen and account managers at training workshops, I worry I am not prepared for my first day. The night before, I toss and turn, anxious that

I won't wake up with my 4 a.m. alarm, or that my presence in the field will backfire – what if the cleaners won't talk to me or even acknowledge my presence? But after a fitful sleep, I am brimming with excitement and anxious curiosity as I cycle to Potsdamer Platz at dawn.

Before 5 a.m. on my first day in the field, Norbert and Tom, the account manager at Potsdamer Platz, welcome me in their thick Berlin accents. Tom walks me through the formal introduction for new cleaners: safety and cleaning guidelines, the Potsdamer Platz map and the confidentiality rules regarding client information.

A tour of Potsdamer Platz and its architectural highlights follows. At one point, in a dusty construction elevator, Norbert warns me using the formal German “Sie”: “Careful, don't lean against it and get dirty!” On this introductory tour, I am still a visitor, one with nice clothes and contacts at headquarters. Ludwig, CleanUp's human resources manager, has granted me wide access, acknowledging the company's interest in raising public awareness of cleaning work. For Tom and Norbert, I am someone from “the university,” a remote institution where none of them has ever set foot except perhaps to clean it. While I have decided to be transparent about my academic background and motivation, I certainly don't want to emphasize my university pedigree, for example pointing out my title of Prof. Dr., which would only reinforce the cultural, social and economic gap between them and me. (Later, once I am well immersed in the field, cleaners will ask about my title and react with laughter and disbelief when they learn that I – a thirty-year-old half-Greek female who expresses herself colloquially – am a professor. They'll demand to see my ID.)

After showing me around, Tom and Norbert introduce me to Michaela, a sixty-two-year-old cleaner from the former East Berlin. Following a brief greeting, Michaela trains me. She shows me how to clean the toilets, using a brush and a particularly strong cleaning fluid. To my surprise, she works without gloves. These wouldn't let her “adequately feel” what she touches. No gloves for her, no gloves for me, I decide, and so begins my first shift.

During the 9 a.m. break, I sit at a table drinking coffee and eating breakfast with Michaela and other cleaners. Cleaners exchange curious looks in silence; I should introduce myself. “My name is Jana,” I say. “I'm here from the university to study cleaners. I am simply interested in learning what it means to work as a cleaner.”

Michaela is the first to respond. “Well finally,” she says. “Finally somebody is coming here to pay attention instead of taking us for granted all the time.”

I am relieved to find people so welcoming. To some degree it surprises me that cleaners like Michaela take my presence there as a sign of appreciation and respect. I am, after all, a person who comes from the “upperworld” that generally tends to overlook if not look down on cleaners. Indeed, not everyone reacts like Michaela. Some cleaners keep their distance, half-jokingly referring to me as a management “mole.”

Overall, however, cleaners open up to me more than I expected, perhaps because I work alongside them. Admittedly, I report for work two to four times per week, not five or six. Nor do I have fixed shifts. Instead, I change shifts every two to three weeks to get to know different cleaners and gain insights into the varied nature of cleaning services: from cleaning private apartments, offices, lobbies and shopping malls to window and post-construction cleaning. Still, I work full shifts at Potsdamer Platz, from 5 a.m. to 1:30 p.m., and do my best to do the job as the others do it: brushing toilets without gloves, sweeping staircases, picking up cigarette butts from the street and mopping up urine. I present myself as an assistant who wants to learn and help and who is generally curious to understand cleaners’ take on things.

Cleaning from the Outset: Invisible Dirty Work at the Bottom

Cleaners conduct what the literature terms “dirty work.”⁴ They deal with the “physically disgusting,”⁵ that is, matter that people prefer not to see, smell or touch. This makes cleaning a prototypical example of a stigmatized occupation, one that enjoys little, if any, prestige or respect.

There is a further reason why cleaning work seems undignified. Both cleaners and their work remain largely invisible. When work is invisible, people tend to value it less, both symbolically and materially.⁶ At Potsdamer Platz, cleaners are made invisible in different ways. They commute more than an hour from Berlin’s more affordable outer

⁴ Hughes (1984/2009); see also Ashforth and Kreiner (1999), Bolton (2005), Kreiner et al. (2006), Ashforth et al. (2007), Paetzold et al. (2008), Baran et al. (2012).

⁵ Hughes (1984/2009: 344). ⁶ Crain et al. (2016).

Cleaning from the Outset: Invisible Dirty Work at the Bottom 5

districts to begin their work at 5 a.m. By the time white-collar workers, consumers and tourists enter the complex, cleaners have already fulfilled the bulk of their day's shift. They have extracted scraped chewing gum from marble floors, wiped coffee stains from office desks and scrubbed toilets. To keep the cleaners out of sight, their shifts are scheduled to minimize contact with the public.⁷ Compared with the European average, German cleaners work odd hours: in the evening, at night or early morning.⁸

At Potsdamer Platz, cleaners inhabit a hidden corporate underworld. Like a building foundation, the underworld is as indispensable as it is invisible. Only with a special key card can one go from the gleaming upperworld to the dark labyrinth below, where low ceilings trap air thick with the smell of waste. As the magazine *Potsdamer Platz* explains, the services and activities of the workers are “discreetly sunk” into the minus area,⁹ where they will not “disturb” above-ground residents. This reflects the broader trend in architecture and urban planning of “vertical growth”¹⁰ in which higher towers for the elite are accompanied by lower basements with service centers, garbage collection points and workers.

The fact that the cleaners work for and report to CleanUp, rather than to individual clients, compounds the problem of their invisibility. In recent decades, organizations increasingly outsource service work¹¹ like cleaning in order to cut costs and increase flexibility. The outsourcing of private household service work has also been on the rise.¹² The German cleaning market, the biggest in Europe, has shown high growth rates.¹³ The resulting corporate work arrangements of cleaners

⁷ My study thus adds the dimension of temporality to Hatton's (2017) analytical concept of invisible work, which focuses on sociocultural, spatial and legal dimensions. On nightwork, see also Müller (2019).

⁸ In Germany, 50 percent of cleaning services take place in the evening, 5 percent at night and 30 percent in the morning, leaving only 15 percent for daytime cleaning. The European average of daytime cleaning is 25 percent Grömling (2007) in *ArbeitGestalten* (2017).

⁹ <https://potsdamerplatz.de/en/discreetly-sunk/> (accessed June 2017).
¹⁰ Graham (2016).

¹¹ This is part of the general trend toward the “market rationality” paradigm driving much management thought in recent decades (Kunda & Ailon-Souday, 2006; see also Aguiar and Herod [2006] in relation to the cleaning industry).

¹² Farvaque (2013).

¹³ <https://die-gebaeuedienstleister.de/die-branche/daten-und-fakten> (accessed September 2021).

minimize direct contact with service recipients. In addition, cleaners' work does not need to be "consumed" and "produced" simultaneously; in fact, it is easier to clean in the absence of clients.¹⁴ Not just the cleaners' presence but the work itself can easily be overlooked or taken for granted. The importance of cleanliness is often best appreciated when things get dirty.¹⁵

Cleaning also sits near the bottom of the labor market hierarchy in terms of skill and pay. It is regarded as "servant labor," a kind of "low-skilled work that is done for others who could perfectly well do it themselves."¹⁶ Although CleanUp introduced an hourly minimum wage before German law enforced it in 2015,¹⁷ cleaners' income remains low, especially for those who work only a few hours per day. Germany's social safety net protects cleaners.¹⁸ Nevertheless, income inequality persists.¹⁹ At Potsdamer Platz, a cleaner is paid around €10–11 per hour whereas the lawyer in the cleaned office more than twenty times that amount.

Altogether, cleaning at Potsdamer Platz combines a lot of features that make this work unpleasant and degrading and place it at the low end of the employment spectrum: cleaning means dealing with filth, being made invisible and conducting low-skilled, low-paid labor. It seems to be a job people do for financial necessity alone. There seems to be little, if anything, that is dignifying about being a cleaner.

¹⁴ While customer service is commonly understood to constitute interactive service work (e.g. MacDonald & Korczynski, 2009), cleaning amounts to non-interactive service work.

¹⁵ Karafyllis (2013: 18). ¹⁶ Sayer (2007: 577).

¹⁷ Depending on the German state (former East versus West), in 2020 this ranged from €10,55–€10,80 for interior and maintenance cleaning to €13,50–€14,10 for glass cleaning (<https://dgb.de/schwerpunkt/mindestlohn/hintergrund/branchenmindestloehne#GEBÄUDEREINIGUNG> accessed September 2021).

¹⁸ To this extent, they are not the so-called working poor, unable to provide for basic needs like healthcare, as is commonly the case with service workers in the United States (AMJ Editors, 2010; Leana et al., 2012). The cleaning work and the cleaners I am studying therefore differ from the service work and the working poor studied by Ehrenreich (2001).

¹⁹ Especially from 1999 to 2005, income inequality grew in Germany (Krause, 2015). While it is leveling off now, it is still significantly higher than it was twenty years ago. In comparison with other EU countries, Germany's income inequality is just below the EU average (www.boeckler.de/de/soziale-ungleichheit-18291-ungleichheit-geht-kaum-zurueck-4416.htm accessed September 2021). The rise of inequality in Germany has also been related to the expansion of low-wage work (Bosch and Weinkopf, 2008).

Perspectives from the Corporate Underworld

At Potsdamer Platz, cleaners' attitudes toward their work prove to be less straightforward. Of course, they do it for the money – but there's more to it. What troubles the observer, cleaners may in fact welcome.

As I work alongside the cleaners, I'm struck by the care they take in the job: Michaela, for example, refusing gloves in the service of precision. Rather than feeling disgusted by filth, some cleaners seem to derive excitement and even pride from dealing with the worst of it (dead animals, human excrement). Cleaning can be dismal and repetitive, yet cleaners may also find it fun, varied and conducive to a certain degree of autonomy. As the long-serving cleaner Ali puts it: "I enjoy my work. You know I am my own boss here." Cleaners are quick to point out that there is more to cleaning than just pushing a mop or emptying the trash. Interior and exterior cleaning, glass wiping and maid service, all require different skill sets and experience.

In service work like cleaning, educational and work-experience barriers to entry are low; workforce diversity is correspondingly high. At Potsdamer Platz, I encounter cleaners who are young and old; female and male; West German, East German and foreign; black and white; educated and uneducated; trained and untrained. What they all share is that they come from the social underworld. Histories of unemployment, immigration, criminal records and homelessness run through their lives. For these people, cleaning comes with the pride of work, the hope of belonging to a community and the promise of becoming a full-fledged member of society. At the boundary of employment and unemployment, of integration and exclusion, cleaners regard their work as more than just an undignified job.

During my fieldwork, I also become aware that the corporate underworld is a zone of mixed blessings. It provides cleaners with little sun or air, fosters conflicts and, indeed, reinforces cleaners' lack of recognition by the upperworld. But the underworld also allows them to earn a living, find a refuge from surveillance, elude encounters with upperworlders and build coalitions with other workers.

All of this suggests that public perception of cleaners and their work does not necessarily reflect how cleaners see themselves. The value system of the upperworld does not completely dominate and determine

that of the underworld.²⁰ On the contrary, the cleaners at Potsdamer Platz also seem to approach their work as a source of dignity. But how can cleaners develop and maintain this dignity at work? How do CleanUp, coworkers, clients and upperworlders generally shape cleaners' dignity? What happens when others deny cleaners respect or recognition?

Dramas of Dignity

Dignity is about the state of being worthy. It entails both developing a sense of self-worth and being treated as worthy by others.²¹ In the case of the cleaners, these two sides of dignity are often in tension: cleaners seek to derive a sense of worth from their work, yet when they interact with others, they are often denied respect and recognition. As a result, they face what I will term *dramas of dignity*.

This notion captures the emotional intensity and tension involved as cleaners struggle to attain and maintain dignity. Indeed, dignity is not something one can casually do without. As the sociologists Richard Sennett and Jonathan Cobb argue in *Hidden Injuries of Class*, it constitutes “a compelling human need.”²² Dignity may be thought of as inherently fragile, a fragility that manifests itself differently in the life of a cleaner and, say, a university professor. The latter belongs to an institution that confers high status, starting with a title. Cleaners' dignity finds little if any institutional anchor. While the professor may be more vulnerable to the loss of dignity, cleaners have to work much harder to gain it in the first place.

The dramas of dignity I observe in my research bring into focus the significance of social interactions at work. The sociologist Everett Hughes has referred to the “social drama of work” to capture how “every kind of work takes place in a social matrix and involves social interactions.”²³ In order to understand work, it is not enough to focus on the “technical tasks” people perform. One has to “understand the roles of the various people involved in it.”²⁴ For Hughes, it should therefore be “[o]ur aim . . . to *penetrate more deeply* into the personal

²⁰ Hall (1992: 273). In this regard, Lamont (1992) and Hall (1992) criticize Bourdieu's approach.

²¹ Hodson (2001), Sayer (2007). ²² Sennett and Cobb (1972: 191).

²³ Hughes (1951: 123). ²⁴ Hughes (1976: 2).

and social drama of work, to understand ... [how] men [sic] make their work tolerable, or even glorious to themselves and others.”²⁵

For this reason, we should approach cleaners’ struggles with dignity as dramas that unfold in a social context. It is not enough to look at how workers develop a sense of self-worth. It is also necessary to explore how and whether their sense of worth is undermined or maintained when they interact with others.²⁶ Focusing on social interactions, this book aims to show how cleaners are not passive, but are rather actively involved in these dramas. This is not to deny that they also face challenges and severe constraints, such as those posed by their role and working conditions.

By exploring cleaners’ dramas of dignity, I will point out how we, the upperworlders, are directly or indirectly involved. These workers mainly cater to us, the mall shoppers, the office workers and the tourists. Their work is vital to our organizations, the economy and society as a whole. Yet workers like the Potsdamer Platz cleaners receive too little recognition from the upperworld.

Research may perpetuate the problem. Work, workers and organizations at the low end of the employment spectrum have received little attention.²⁷ If invisibility does, indeed, correlate with being less valued, then the lack of research attention to cleaners and other low-end workers represents a significant problem.²⁸ The line of research that looks at “dirty work” can also be problematic.²⁹ When Ludwig at CleanUp HR hears about the so-called “dirty work” literature, he

²⁵ Hughes (1958/2012: 48; emphasis in original).

²⁶ As Collins (2000: 18) has also argued, “[o]ccupational prestige can only be realistically understood if we can survey situations of occupational encounters and judge the actual situational stratification which takes place.”

²⁷ AMJ Editors (2010), Leana et al. (2012).

²⁸ As a side note, the often dark history of service work, particularly domestic work, is also frequently overlooked not only in popular claims about the supposed shift from industrial to service economies, but also in dominant social and economic histories. It does not play a role, for example, in E. P. Thompson’s prominent *The Making of the English Working Class*. This neglect may arise from the fact that, from Adam Smith to Karl Marx, service work has fallen under “unproductive” or “reproductive” labor. Such work takes place in the domestic realm, employs women and isn’t unionized. By the middle of the twentieth century – earlier in Germany – such service work declined when women entered the industrial workforce and demanded more rights, among other reasons.

²⁹ E.g. Ashforth and Kreiner (1999), Bolton (2005), Kreiner et al. (2006), Ashforth et al. (2007), Paetzold et al. (2008), Baran et al. (2012).

shakes his head with chagrin; it is precisely this labeling that reinforces the stigmatization of occupations like cleaning. It also risks prioritizing theoretical assumption over lived experience, assuming that people, by default, suffer from doing “dirty work” and must develop coping strategies against stigmatization. While the cleaning occupation undoubtedly struggles with stigmatization, we should resist the temptation to reduce every cleaner’s work life to this, lest we foreclose the possibility of developing a sense of worth more robust than a mere defense against the “dirty work” stigma.

Bearing in mind the difficulties inherent in questions of representation, authorship and authority,³⁰ I hope to give voice to those who remain otherwise invisible and “inaudible”³¹ to academe and the broader public. This ethnography aims to acknowledge people who reside and work at the bottom – in the corporate underworld. Of course, this does not mean that cleaners, or any other workers for that matter, should be approached in an uncritical manner. There is nothing to romanticize about cleaners, especially how they interact with each other. Discriminatory and racist attitudes are not uncommon among the cleaners. Nonetheless, they deserve a work life with dignity.

A Preview

Chapter 1 sets the scene of the cleaners’ work life. It provides a tour of Potsdamer Platz, its history and space. I will start with Potsdamer Platz’s upperworld before descending into the underworld to introduce cleaners’ presence from below.

Chapter 2 introduces four characters from the corporate underworld, the young German trainee Alex, the Turkish veteran Ali, the Mozambican newcomer Luisa and the East German dropout Marcel. It also provides an overview of the cleaning occupation, its history and status, as well as CleanUp management’s human resources approach. The stories of the four cleaners illustrate different paths that lead people into cleaning. In contrast to the negative public perception of cleaning, the chapter shows how their work can also represent to all four cleaners a portal to dignity.

In Chapter 3, the focus turns to the various ways in which cleaners experience and approach dirt. Dirt matters in their everyday work life

³⁰ Clifford and Marcus (1986). ³¹ Hochschild (2016: xiv).

not just symbolically, but also in its very materiality. In exploring how working with dirt brings about a whole mix of experiences – frustration and satisfaction, disgust and fascination, freedom and servitude, humiliation and pride – I argue for the need to move beyond the common assumption of dirt as merely a source of shame.

Chapter 4 looks at relationships and interactions among the cleaners. I analyze how cleaners show little interest in defining themselves as a group. Instead, alliances and divisions mark their microcosm. These come about as cleaners produce and enforce markers of difference to establish a status hierarchy among themselves. However, while cleaners seek to differentiate themselves from each other, a sense of negative equivalence, of belonging to a stigmatized group of “anyones,” persists and poses a great threat to their sense of worth and the status hierarchy they seek to construct.

In Chapter 5, I discuss what happens to cleaners’ dignity as they enter the upperworld and interact with clients and other upperworlders. While cleaners can experience appreciation and derive a sense of exclusivity from their access to the upperworld, more often than not cleaners feel looked down upon or simply ignored. Cleaners deal with the threats to their dignity in the upperworld in different ways, from debunking the upperworld and confronting it to withdrawing back underground.

Chapter 6 develops how surveillance shapes cleaners’ everyday work life. It studies how cleaners feel being watched by clients, security guards, CleanUp management and sometimes even coworkers. Such surveillance may amount to an attack on cleaners’ sense of worth to the extent that it represents distrust in their work abilities and efforts, and the resulting need to control them. I explore how cleaners counter surveillance by engaging in various tactics, from turning against, off and away from surveillance.

The concluding chapter brings together the main findings of the book to explicate cleaners’ dramas of dignity. It discusses whether the presence of invisible service workers in corporate underworlds marks a return of the servant society. The chapter ends with a reflection on the presence of two images – the Statue of Liberty and Harold Lloyd – in Potsdamer Platz’s underworld.