

Manners: The History of Living in Society

We have manners, we are polite, because we care what others think of us. There is no surer proof of the existence of “society,” as opposed to a world made up of discrete, unconnected individuals, than our sensitivity about others’ feelings about us or their estimation of us. What we discover, however, is that Western peoples enjoy (or don’t) greater distance from each other than has ever existed in recorded history. For centuries, most of humanity has lived in the presence of others from birth until death. It is only Western civilized people who have developed a style of life which permits “privacy.” Perhaps because of this, we today find it more difficult than ever to interact with other human beings. Our treasured privacy and individualism has stunted our ability to understand and sympathize with others. The modern American and European represents a special type of person never before encountered in human history: the isolated individual. We need to make a special effort to relate to others and find less satisfaction in human society than people did in the past. Thus, we have developed over the years an elaborate system of manners to deal with this awkward problem of living with others.

These four lectures describe how this idea of manners came to be, at least in Western Civilization, because despite what you may think, it has not always been the case that manners or politeness were the order of the day. The first lecture looks at the work of the late sociologist, Norbert Elias, and his pioneering study of how “manners” became instilled in the Western European upper classes during the transition from feudalism to the early modern era (roughly 1200 to 1600). Next, we next look at the work of a Renaissance Man, Baldassare Castiglione, who tried to catalogue the various attributes of a well-rounded gentleman and a polite lady. The third lecture delves into the training of children in politeness, starting with the teachings of Erasmus in 1530 through lessons instilled in American children from the 1800s to the present. Education in the new democratic society, in other words, meant not just book learning, but moral improvement. The final lecture examines our contemporary concern with “political correctness,” and the MeToo movement in the light of the long history of Western Civilization’s efforts to create a more refined and polite society. We will find that what we call “manners” is rooted in much more profound matters than deciding which dinner utensil to use. In fact, politeness is an essential element in the concept of civilization and in many ways defines what it means to be a well-rounded, modern human being.

Defining “manners” is not easy. What may be perfectly acceptable table manners in one culture, for instance, can be totally unacceptable in another. The anthropologist Franz Boas wrote: “Courtesy, modesty, good manners, conformity to definite ethical standards are universal, but what constitutes courtesy, modesty, good manners, and ethical standards is not universal.” We will confine our discussion to Western Civilization, but still make occasional comparisons with practices from other cultures. Closely related to manners is the idea of “courtesy.” The word itself comes from “courtly” or the way people behaved at the king’s or prince’s court. Courtesy has a more precise meaning than manners. A courteous person may have bad table manners, and a mannerly person may under certain circumstances be discourteous. Manners were “invented” we might say to regularize behavior in certain defined situations, such as at the table or in a social setting. Courtesy pertains specifically to how we treat other people and is applicable to a wider array of social settings than manners.

The term “civility” arose in Europe after both courtesy and manners, and from the 17th century on applied primarily to people living in cities. Civil behavior implied you were an urban person, whereas uncivil behavior denoted someone from the country, a “peasant,” who was assumed to lack manners and polish.

It is important to understand that manners, and especially courtesy, applied at first only to one’s social equals or superiors. Up until the 1700s, or even the 1800s in many places, rude behavior toward one’s social “inferiors,” such as servants or common laborers, did not result in any social reproach. Also, men

could act one way toward women of equal or superior social rank, but totally differently toward those from the “lower classes.” The most extreme example of this sort of social distinction during the modern era (since the French Revolution) would probably be the behavior of white people toward enslaved blacks, and after slavery had been abolished, toward black or other non-white people in general. Courtesy, in other words, was (and to a certain extent still is) conditioned by racial bias as well as by social class.

Lecture I: The Origin of Manners in Europe

Norbert Elias, a Jewish scholar who fled Nazi Germany in the 1930s, pioneered the study of “the civilizing process,” the title of his seminal work. The idea that manners could tell us the degree to which a person was “civilized” might seem somewhat simple-minded. Elias, however, shows in his book how in Western Europe during the transition from feudalism to the modern, centralized nation state, society underwent a gradual process of “gentrification,” with a decline in random warfare and personal violence to a more settled state of security and law. Although this process (Elias concentrates his study on this transition in France) included a great deal of violence. With a weak central authority led by a monarch whose authority was not widely recognized, the reduction of smaller feudal lords to the power of the kings slowly made Paris the capital of France, and made goings-on at the king’s court the equivalent of trends in Hollywood, New York, and Washington. The Capetians and their successors, the Valois and the Bourbon dynasties, continued this process of centralization and domestic pacification.

Elias traces the growth of courtesy in part to powerful women at the French court, especially the indomitable Catherine de Medici, the Italian-born consort of Henry II and the mother of two other French kings between 1547 and 1589. Catherine did not in fact introduce the use of the fork to polite society, but she did much to create and refine the whole concept of courtly life. It was only fitting that this civilizing process stemmed from the influence of an Italian noblewoman born in Florence. The Medici family of Florence represented the height of Renaissance sophistication in the arts and in the art of living. Catherine’s influence was greatly enhanced, of course, by the political power of the French monarchy, which was growing into the absolutist state that would continue to dominate French political and social life until the Revolution of 1789. Courtesy itself reflected the declining prestige of armed combat as a way of life and the increase in peaceful pursuits, including money-making, as the road to social advancement. In many ways, the Renaissance amounted to a “feminization” of Italian (and then French) society. Elias could have pointed to numerous examples of Italian noblewomen who presided over glittering social (and intellectual) salons during the Renaissance. Less civilized places in central and eastern Europe, largely untouched by the Renaissance influence, lacked this gentle feminine touch and remained firmly tied to the old martial virtues. Courtesy, Elias points out, could not have evolved the way it did had these powerful women not put their imprint on society.

Elias concentrates on French and to a lesser extent German court society, but the early centralization of power in the English monarchy after the Norman Conquest of 1066 also dampened, but did not completely eliminate, domestic armed conflict. We can trace the English concept of “fair play” to the influence of the courtly aristocracy, which gradually imposed rules of behavior upon the kingdom’s knights, leading many of them to forsake England entirely and seek opportunities abroad as mercenary fighters. Unlike France and the German states, England allowed females to inherit the top position in the state. Perhaps the leading figure in the civilization of early modern England was Queen Elizabeth I, who reigned from 1558 to 1603. She succeeded her half-sister Mary Tudor, who, like Catherine de Medici, is remembered mainly for her bloody repression of non-Catholics. The religious wars in France and elsewhere in Europe during the late 1500s and early 1600s obscure the general pacification taking place in this post-feudal period. Unfortunately, even supposedly polite and civilized people dropped all pretense of civility when the issue of religious practice and belief came to the fore. Elizabeth sought to lessen religious tensions in England through the enactment of the Act of Settlement in 1559 that ended the

persecution of Protestants while allowing Catholics to retain their religious practices, at least in private. The struggle between Protestants and Catholics and between Church of England and Dissenter Protestants continued until the passage of the Act of Toleration in 1689, but an increasingly secularized England was well on the road to becoming a state where people were no longer judged on the basis of their religious convictions. This “live and let live” attitude ended the long and bloody era of religious persecution and England has not had any serious domestic disorders (except perhaps the Gordon Riots of the 1780s) since that time. Removing religion from the domestic political agenda had a major civilizing influence in England (but not in Ireland, where the English continued to combat what they saw as a Catholic insurgency) and opened the road to a modern, secular society.

The concept of fair play derives from the code of conduct adopted by knights in Europe during the age of chivalry. It had both religious and classical ethical roots. In its original conception it applied, unfortunately, only to behavior toward other knights and aristocratic personages. The common people and “Infidels” were in fact “fair game.” Although chivalry was somewhat narrowly understood by later ages as an “honorable and polite way of behaving, especially toward women,” the practice also entailed honoring your defeated foe and achieving success on the field of battle through heroic, man-to-man combat. It disallowed the ambush or any other forms of trickery, a problem for later soldiers when faced with the tactics of Indians or other uncivilized opponents. Young English boys had the virtue of “fair play” instilled in them at school, where “character” was supposed to be formed in a more controlled environment than that found on the battlefield. Historians often point to the wanton slaughter of World War I as having obliterated the idea that war could be conducted in a “civilized” manner. Still, even during that breakdown in civilization, there were occasional reminders of a common humanity between the bitter foes.

Off the battlefield, however, politeness reigned in a place like England, where American travelers and soldiers in World War II, marveled at the gentility of their English hosts. It was often remarked that the British “Bobbies” did not even carry firearms because no one would dare to threaten them with physical harm and even the robbers tended to raise their hands and surrender when caught. Of course all this has changed.

Elias wrote his book on the “civilizing process” while living in Nazi Germany, publishing it in 1936, just two years before he fled abroad to escape persecution and the threat of death at the hands of Hitler’s minions. As noted by Elias and others, the process of civilization had advanced further in places like France, England, and even Italy, than in Germany, not to mention Russia. When faced with the Nazi menace, the “civilized” peoples of Europe showed a complete inability to react and soon found themselves fighting for their lives against a quite uncivilized foe.

Perhaps the most arresting aspect of Elias’s book is its concentration on the development of personal habits, particularly the increasing “shame” level in which actions formerly done in public slowly moved into the private sphere. His examples include such things as how people prepared for bed, with the development of night clothes overtaking the previous practice of sleeping naked. In fact, cotton or linen underwear slowly became a necessary part of the civilized individual’s wardrobe. For centuries it was common practice for men to share a bed when sleeping away from home. This practice continued into modern times in many places. Lincoln relates his experiences sharing beds with other men in various flea bag hotels in Illinois as he traveled around the state doing his legal work. A private hotel room amounted to a luxury. One can visit a communal sleeping room at the old Carlyle Tavern in Alexandria, where the top floor accommodated a number of beds meant to be shared by male travelers. Females had a much harder time of it when traveling, given the lack of privacy. Elias cites a number of medieval and early modern texts relating how noble men and women felt no shame about cavorting in a common bath (this in the 1400s in England) while the local peasantry looked on. Nudity in front of servants posed no problem for the aristocracy, who considered these lower class folks as little more than furniture.

Toilet habits too are described by Elias in great detail. Before the transition to indoor plumbing, people (especially men) relieved themselves in any convenient corner or behind a bush or tree. Once again, women had a harder time of it and this explains in part why they were less likely to be seen in public. The chamber pot was not of any use without a “chamber.”

Elias’s point is that the movement of these intimate actions from the public to the private sphere constituted a revolution in the way people interacted. The process speeded up greatly in the 19th century during the so-called “Victorian Era,” roughly from 1840 to 1914. During these years theater goers would have been shocked to hear a Shakespeare play produced with all of the original language and actions left intact. Bowdlerization, named for the English doctor who produced a *Family Shakespeare* in which matters considered inappropriate for women and children were left out or sanitized, became a best-seller. Bowdler’s work enjoyed great success and may have constituted a sort of “over-civilizing” movement in which certain people became so sensitive to what they viewed as immoral or offensive language that they, in effect, endorsed a form of censorship.

Elias’s research shows a gradual and growing intolerance toward vulgarity and immodesty in Europe, and, in fact, the very meaning of these terms came to be widened to include actions and words not previously considered offensive.

One of the last civilizing steps was the restraint of the base human impulse to inflict pain on others or, at least, to witness such acts. In the feudal and pre-modern period in Europe, up to about the late 1700s, public executions played an important role in keeping the underclass in order, but also (ironically) provided a great deal of pleasure to members of that very underclass, and also many of their “betters.” As Elias notes: “*The pleasure in killing and torturing others was great, and it was a socially permitted pleasure. To a certain extent, the social structure even pushed its members in this direction, making it seem necessary and practically advantageous to behave in this way.*” Of course, pre-civilized people, so-called “savages,” acted in this way as a matter of course. Enemy warriors taken captive were routinely tortured and killed. It was all part of the game of life and expected. But, the civilizing impulse, especially during the 18th century Enlightenment, gradually led the way to the end of these practices, to the point where today, torture and public executions are illegal in most countries.

Similar softening of the human conscience can be seen in the treatment of animals. Whereas cat-burning, cock fighting, bull baiting, and dog fights used to be common public entertainments, often attended by the upper class as well as the local rabble, the civilizing influence has all but ended these practices. We still have fox hunting and bull fights in certain places, but, in general, cruelty towards animals and as well as towards other humans has come to be disapproved or downright outlawed. In Elias’s mind, and that of many other historians of manners, the same impulse that led to better table manners, and shame about the naked body and body functions, explains the movement to end torture, public executions, and cruelty towards animals.

The softening of manners which we associate with the idea of “civilization” did not mean that all people were to be treated equally. In fact, in its earliest days Christianity accepted human slavery as a natural condition, sometimes imposed by the fortunes of war or due to economic reverses which forced persons to “sell themselves” to a master in order to obtain food and lodging in return for labor. Slavery, a basic feature of the late Roman Empire, gradually disappeared in Europe during the Middle Ages and was replaced by serfdom. In most of continental Europe during the almost one thousand years between the fall of Rome (in the West, 476 C.E.) and the coming of the Renaissance in the 1400s, most of the population were serfs or peasants, with more or less personal liberty. Serfdom did not take hold in Great Britain, however, or at least not to the same extent as in France and areas further east. The result was that the relationship between “master and man” differed considerably in England and Scotland from what was

found in France or the German states. The Church, whether Catholic or later Protestant, never questioned this subservience of most of the population to what were considered to be the “natural rulers,” many of whom had emerged from the lower classes themselves through successful feats of arms. Thus, courtesy applied only to other members of the aristocracy, while the serfs and servants in general were subject to harsh discipline and frequent injustices. It is important to note that the serfs were of the same racial background as their masters: this was not the race slavery that became so important outside of Europe in the years from 1500 on.

But then, of course, everything comes back to Hitler. Elias was himself a victim of a cruel and uncivilized regime led by a man of diabolical cruelty. When confronted with this horrible challenge, the “civilized” men of France and England could only seek excuses for not acting or disapprove in private, while doing nothing to stop the uncivilized behavior in public. Civilized people, it turned out, were powerless when confronted with uncivilized behavior. They certainly disapproved, and would never engage in such behavior themselves, but they felt no burning need to intervene to prevent cruel behavior by others. It turned out that “civilized behavior” pertained above all to one’s personal code of ethics and had little to do with the state of society in general. In other words, civilization lacked an enforcement mechanism.