

Lecture IV: Modern Manners

How do manners today differ from those of a century or two ago? Are we less polite, more polite, or about the same? What are some of the factors that have changed the way we behave today compared to how our ancestors or those Europeans of the Renaissance and Early Modern periods?

Starting with the last question, we can easily cite many developments that have influenced how we behave around others. One factor is certainly the development of the automobile as the primary mode of transport. Another might be the vast changes in the relations between the sexes. We could also point to the influence of television and the movies, and now the so-called “social media.” Today the average person is presented with a host of conflicting messages about what proper behavior is: with the stand-up comedian now using expletive-filled jokes to amuse his audience, and the rapper strewing his singing with profanity and often misogynistic lyrics. In a way, we have a situation in which our entertainment personalities behave in one-way, while the average person hews to much more traditional modes of conduct. Hollywood has long purveyed lurid stories and R-rated on-screen action, but how has this explicitly rude, crude, and violent acting actually influenced the way the average person conducts him or herself?

One clear change over the lifetime of most of us has been the striking decline in modesty as a cardinal virtue. Many books have been written about this rapid evolution from the rather demure attire and childlike simplicity characteristic of our long-ago youth, to today’s celebration of maximum indulgence and self-expression. The idea that good manners entailed the repression of many of our basic urges in deference to the feelings of others has undergone a marked decline. An optimist might say that casualness has replaced formality and naturalness has replaced pretension. A pessimist might say, on the other hand, that immediate gratification has replaced conscientious consideration of others’ feelings and opinions.

To the manners guru Judith Martin (Miss Manners), this plague is traceable to the unbuttoned 1960s and especially to “do good-ers” who insist on trying to correct other peoples’ living habits or impugn their morality. The self-righteous are indeed a plague, but in the grand scheme of things, they are a minor irritant compared to the more brutally impolite people who believe they have the right to live the way they want to, no matter how badly it offends or inconveniences others. Spousal abuse, which has long been a scourge, continues in America and seems to be no respecter of socio-economic status. The man who beats his wife and/or children is a menace not just to them, but to polite society generally. Sometimes this problem is caused by alcohol or drugs, but these addictions may in fact be the result of a deeper personality disorder or personal unhappiness. There will always be a certain number of people who blame others for their own faults or weaknesses and lash out in anger, or verbally abuse those around them. These folks, not the overzealous idealists who want to correct your personal habits (i.e., stop you from smoking or drinking, for instance) or criticize you for spoiling the environment, are the real problem.

As noted earlier, de Toqueville thought this disdain for formality and penchant for frankness were natural characteristics of Americans. Living on the frontier, in a hurry to get things done, elaborate politeness seemed a needless hindrance to dealing with the substance of things. In his book *Choosing Civility*, the Johns Hopkins professor P.M. Forni, who grew up in Italy before coming to the United States as a young adult, notes his surprise when a nurse in a doctor’s office, with whom he had had no previous contact, addressed him by his first name. In Italy, and in Europe generally, this would have been rude. Such familiarity connoted lack of respect. One addressed servants by their first name, but not customers (or patients). But, upon reflection, and over time, Forni came to understand that “no disrespect was intended.” It was just the informal way Americans talked to each other. Forni concluded (following de

Tocqueville) that, “. . . in America more than elsewhere manners, politeness, and civility – all having to do with form and formality – are called into question as veils hiding the bright face of truth. They are also suspect as markers of class privilege, as threats to freedom of self-expression, and as relics tainted by convention.” The reaction against “political correctness” is very American, since employing sexual or racial stereotypes or epithets seems to many older (usually white, male) people simply a way of expressing an unvarnished truth. That such language could be considered hurtful or rude seems to them to be unimportant and an overreaction. At some point, however, the “informal” does become the “rude.” Finding the dividing line depends on who you are addressing and how your words might be interpreted by both their intended target and by others. Let’s face it, as a white, male, I have never had to deal with either sexist or racist remarks directed at myself. But I think I know what such remarks sound like and how they could be hurtful. My own least-favorite American informality is the way young people answer the phone: not “hello,” but “hey.” I’m not sure why this happened, but I will continue to say hello. My other pet peeve is the tendency of store clerks to fail to make eye contact when they talk to you. I am somewhat deaf and when someone fails to address me to my face, I often don’t hear or misunderstand what they are saying. Polite behavior (in Western culture, at any rate) requires one to make at least fleeting eye contact with the person you are talking to. This is a practice that every store manager should instill in their staff. Enough said.

On a more basic level, the way we treat one another in our daily interactions has a much larger reflection in the way social and political groups, and nations themselves, treat each other. While Elias wrote in *The Civilizing Process* that the development of a strong central government in France led to a curtailment of violent conflict among the various petty French principalities, it may also be true that this same process gradually reduced conflict among larger political units. The history of modern Europe, however, hardly bears out this thesis. National rivalries combined with the array of modern weaponry had the effect of greatly accentuating trans-national violence until in the 20th century the nations of Europe all but destroyed the continent’s civilization altogether. It is only in the aftermath of the terrible wars of the first half of the 20th century that we have begun to see a “politer” Europe emerging. European nations discovered how high a price their peoples paid for the arrogant behavior of their leaders, with supposedly civilized countries like Germany, Austria-Hungary, and Italy leading the return to barbaric violence that characterized the late Middle Ages and the Wars of Religion of the 16th and 17th centuries.

I mentioned the almost complete curtailment of dueling by the end of the 19th century. In fact the curtailment of violence, even when elaborately choreographed and almost elevated into an art, seems to have stopped at the national level. Between nations, the outbreak of “wars of honor” actually became more common, with World War I itself nothing more than a horrendously magnified “duel” between Germany, Russia, France, Austria-Hungary, and ultimately nations far from Europe itself, including the U.S. The absence of any agreed system for arbitrating disputes meant that quarrels between nations had to be settled on the battlefield. This is not to say that there were not actual conflicts of interest among the various powers, but national *amour-propre*, otherwise known as patriotism, as well as the egotistical proclivities of the German Kaiser and the Russian Tsar, played a decisive role in the outbreak of these conflicts.

Good manners, politeness, consideration for others (and other nations), diplomacy (one might say) are essential to the maintenance of world peace. Rudeness, intolerance, disdain for others (including other countries) are all leading indicators of rising tensions leading to armed conflict. Even serious conflicts of interests can be ameliorated and more readily resolved if the parties in contention maintain at least a façade of politeness toward each other. Of course you should be sure you have the backing of firm and strong friends when negotiating a dispute, who can and will step forward to restrain your opponent if he decides to throw a punch at you.

Working our way back down the scale to interpersonal relationships, we see how many of the same rules can be applied in order to maintain peace and a constructive atmosphere. In today's America good manners has come to mean: we treat everyone the same, regardless of their race, religion, sexual orientation, or political views. This principle is enshrined in the 14th Amendment's guarantee of "equal protection of the laws," which prohibits official (i.e., governmental) discrimination, but it has also come to mean that in our everyday behavior toward others, tolerance, not prejudice, is the American way. There is no doubt that this principle is currently under attack, not just in the United States, but throughout the world, even in countries we have long come to consider highly civilized places.

In *Pygmalion*, Professor Higgins justifies his sometimes rude behavior by claiming that he treats all people the same way, whether they are flower girls or duchesses. "The great secret, Eliza, is not having bad manners or good manners or any particular sort of manners, but having the same manners for all human souls: in short, behaving as if you were in Heaven, where there are no third-class carriages, and one soul is as good as another." Of course, this is not true of Henry Higgins, who treats the flower girl with a sort of disdain he would never show toward an upper class woman, but he doubtless believes in the general principle of "democratic" manners and that the differences between people of different social classes are highly superficial and (or so the Shaw would have us believe) can be overcome by the right sort of instruction.

Similarly, we believe in principle in democratic manners, but in practice we tend to discriminate, not just on social class, but on a whole host of levels. This general principle applies both to our personal relationships and to the workings of democratic politics. Democracy itself is underpinned by a general social agreement that disputes will be settled peacefully, with elections and negotiations, and that politics, however acrimonious the issues, will be conducted in a polite and fair manner. We all know that democratic politics has long been characterized by various forms of electoral skulduggery, but, in general, our politicians end up as good losers (or winners) and seek to heal the wounds inflicted during the partisan battle with congratulations to the winner by the loser, and an attempt by the winner to conciliate the voters who supported his opponent in the hopes that he can garner some support for his program from them. Democratic political life should, ideally, imitate a hard-fought athletic contest in which the loser can plan for an eventual comeback. It should never be a zero-sum game and the rights of the minority must be preserved, both by law and in day-to-day compromises between the winners and the losers. Where to draw the line on such enlightened behavior so that it does not end up conceding to the losers the essence of the winner's position is always problematical. Lincoln clearly recognized this danger after his electoral victory in 1860 when various border state politicians asked him to conciliate the South by essentially accepting its position on the future of slavery. That, he said, would amount to cancelling the outcome of the election and to a betrayal of the millions of people who had voted for the Republican ticket.

While many women today complain that powerful men are apt to try to take advantage of females, especially younger ones, another group enjoys unprecedented deference from men and women alike: I mean the disabled, both physical and mental. Starting some decades ago, we can observe a steady increase in sensitivity among the general population toward the needs of the disabled. Words like "crippled," "retarded," and a host of other disparaging terms have all-but disappeared from our vocabularies. Laws mandating public access ramps for buildings and special parking places for those with disabilities have become the norm. Not so long ago, the disabled were apt to be living on charity or small public assistance payments. Today, both public and private money flows to those afflicted with various disabling conditions and their needs are generally given high priority in the design of buildings and other public spaces. All this attention to the needs of the disabled may be due in part to the general aging of the population in the U.S. and Europe, especially. Disabled people and their families vote and the elderly are a potent political force. But we are also seeing a general appreciation for improving the

quality of life of these citizens -- regardless of political expediency-- who are rarely to blame for their condition.

Concern for those afflicted by misfortune has become a hallmark of a modern, democratic society. It is no coincidence that when the Nazis came to power in Germany one of their prime aims was to eliminate all those Germans who suffered from congenital disorders or to subject them to forced sterilization. It is not widely known that Hitler and his supporters murdered more disabled Germans than German Jews. This is what a totally heartless regime does when it gains the power to carry out its ruthless program of racial "improvement." I cite this terrible policy as a perfect example of how a society can treat the less fortunate when it has no empathy for the feelings of others, or is made up of people who care only about their own immediate family or close friends. Outward politeness, in other words, means nothing if such acts are condoned. Our modern concern with protecting the rights and welfare of the disabled can be seen as an expression of our determination to behave with politeness and consideration toward others, even those we do not know. It may also be recognition of the adage that "There, but for the grace of God, go I."

Then there is the monumental change in racial and ethnic references since the civil rights movement of the 1960s. One need only watch old movies to see how commonly accepted racial stereotypes, usually of a deprecatory nature, pervaded popular life. As a kid, I remember listening to *Amos n' Andy* on the radio (it later appeared briefly on TV) and getting a kick out of the amusing Kingfish and the other funny characters featured on the show. I didn't know at the time that the characters were actually voiced by white men, parodying black peoples' accents. You could have laughed as Bing Crosby danced and sang in blackface in the 1942 classic *Holiday Inn*, which made the Christmas carol "White Christmas" an indispensable part of the season. There were also numerous portrayals of white ethnics in movies and on the air that invariably showed them as less than bright. Anti-Semitic jokes were a staple of popular humor, although no one at the time really thought of them as anti-Semitic.

Since the 1960s, the idea of America as a white, Anglo-Saxon country, which had seemed so true and natural up to then, has gradually given way to an appreciation of the nation's racial and ethnic diversity. Adjusting our behavior to accord with this new reality has posed major problems for many members of the dominant racial group. White America has found itself forced to acknowledge years of impolite and unfair behavior toward the black minority, and white and non-white males have had to rethink how they relate to females of all races and backgrounds. What constitutes "civilized behavior" has expanded to include relationships long assumed to be governed by general acceptance of the supremacy of the white male. When future historians of manners look at our era, they will doubtless draw many of the same conclusions that Elias did when he looked at the transition from medieval to early modern behavior. Behavior once accepted as normal would gradually fall into the unacceptable category. As in that earlier time, people stopped eating with their hands and throwing the bones on the floor for the dogs and started to use utensils and disposing of waste in a more sanitary fashion, so today, we address black Americans as "Mr." or "Miss" instead of "boy" or "girl" and share public spaces with people of all different racial and ethnic backgrounds. What we take as normal today would have been unthinkable in many parts of the country in the 1930s or even the 1940s.

Another general development in manners of the post-World War II era is the emergence of the "right to privacy." Although long referred to by legal scholars, this "right" only came to be legally enforceable following a series of Supreme Court decisions in the 1960s and 1970s. In a 1965 decision in the case of *Griswold v. Connecticut* the Court struck down a state law that prohibited the sale and use of contraceptives as a violation of a person's right to privacy in his or her sexual relations. In *Roe v. Wade* of 1974, the Court ruled that government could not prohibit a woman from having an abortion during the period before fetal viability (twelve weeks), since this amounted to interfering in the woman's right to control her own bodily functions. Other decisions on homosexual relationships and the privacy of

medical records further expanded the area in which society as a whole had to respect the private life of individuals.

In many ways these decisions and the social developments they helped foster represented the culmination of a long process of “privatization” of social relations. With the increase in wealth in the developed countries, most people came to enjoy greater insulation from the prying eyes of their neighbors and from their own relatives. Young people increasingly had their own bedrooms, family members spent less time outside the home and instead gathered around the TV set (or the radio in an earlier era). The great suburbanization of America in the 1950s and 1960s meant that middle class people no longer shared a hallway or a laundry room in an apartment building with their neighbors. “Social distancing,” about which we have heard so much during this pandemic, actually began in the 1950s as more and more Americans were separated from their neighbors by expanses of grass. One could even go further back to the mass ownership of automobiles to see this process underway. People in cars may not even be able to see each other (tinted glass seems to be becoming more common), much less exchange greetings. In fact, we can say that the achievement of privacy is one of the key elements of an upper class existence. Lower class people still might have to share a bedroom or a bathroom with other family members, but upper class people rarely are thrown together in this way, even with close family members. One could point to the end of universal military service in the U.S. and most European countries as another, albeit unintentional, step in the process of reduced social contact. (On the other hand, the advent of the “co-ed dorm” at college and the resulting breakdown in the old sexual taboos can be seen as a somewhat countervailing development.)

The desire for privacy, and its enshrinement as a Constitutional right, works against racial integration and social diversity in general. It also means that the workplace, where people of different backgrounds are often thrown together, can become a breeding ground for conflict. The number of workplace shootings and the frequent complaints of sexual harassment in the workplace indicate a major breakdown in manners. Racial, gender, and ethnic diversity are a fact of life in many offices and factories, and managing interpersonal relations in this new reality poses serious challenges to both employees and management. The fact is, people who enjoy privacy and personal freedom in their suburban or ex-urban home life will find it difficult to adjust to an environment in which their “personal space” is extremely constricted. Companies try to address this problem by requiring employees to attend diversity or sensitivity training sessions or other formal approaches, but the fact that once out of the workplace, the various employees each goes back to his or her own much less diverse home environment, means that little progress is made in overcoming interpersonal tensions.

One troublesome problem on the road to “gender equality” is the male-dominated nature of the English (and many other) language. For centuries, when referring to human beings in a general way, we have used the word “man.” When we are unsure of a person’s gender or wish to refer to an individual without specifying the person’s gender, we have traditionally used the word “he.” We all know how this works. To avoid the presumption that the person doing the action is always a male, sometimes people will write or say “he/she” and it has become increasingly common to use “their” or “they” to refer to an individual when you do not wish to specify gender. This leads to some confusion, since using the plural pronoun to refer to an abstract individual person seems to run against the rules of grammar.

Commenting on the Biden campaign’s struggle to make their candidate heard in the present cacophony of Tweet outbursts from President Trump, Obama campaign veterans David Axelrod and David Plouffe observed that “civility isn’t particularly well-suited to social media,” or is it the other way around: social media tends to undermine civility. Setting aside for the time being the question of how best to conduct a presidential campaign, it is interesting that these two campaign experts zero in on the impact of rude social media posts. “Civility,” in their estimation, does not “sell” as effectively as a loud (all capitals) message of questionable veracity does. The art of propaganda has been with us since at least the early

20th century, both as a political persuasion technique, and for commercial purposes in the advertising world. Understatement and modesty, two of the key elements of polite behavior in pre-mass media history, have ceased to be virtues in the modern era. The much-deprecated “loud mouth” of our youth is now the dominant national figure. If you out-shout and interrupt your opponent at every turn, you win the argument -- at least that is what experts like Axelrod and Plouffe seem to be saying. Behavior that would not be allowed in a high school debate encounter has become standard fare in our political debates. Insults and crass imputations against another person’s character that would have led to a duel two hundred years ago are now routinely laughed off.

Postscript

With the pandemic seemingly due to last forever, we are faced (so to speak) with a modern manners issue: whether or not to wear a mask. Businesses have long required certain forms of dress – a shirt and shoes, for instance – before a customer could enter the premises. Now, the government is apt to require the wearing of a mask of people who go out of their house and interact with others. Health experts tell us that if people wore masks, they greatly reduce the possibility of transmission of the Covid-19 virus and therefore, as a service to others, we should be sure to wear a mask in situations where we encounter other people. This is a perfect example of what manners really are: a demonstration of our concern for what others think of us. Unfortunately, in some parts of the country, the masked individual arouses negative reactions from others rather than approval. By wearing a mask, we implicitly say to others “You should be wearing a mask too. I am trying to protect you. Why aren’t you trying to protect me?” Ironically, our good behavior makes the other person uncomfortable and they may even consider your efforts to try to protect them as an invasion of their own space and even their “freedom.”

We have long had seat belt laws that require people to fasten their car seat belts before they start driving. Airlines are required by law to make sure everyone’s seat belt is securely fastened before the plane leaves the gate. Maybe insurance companies should routinely include provisions in their life insurance policies that exclude payment of claims where the person has recklessly endangered his own life: If they are known to have not worn a mask and get Covid-19 and die, their heirs do not get any life insurance payout.

Since the transition from medieval to modern in Europe, there have been countless restrictions on reckless behavior: no more jousting, no duels, no carrying of weapons into public places, and so on. The civilizing process can be viewed as a progressive tightening of such restrictions. Those who find these restrictions too onerous tend to move to sparsely populated places where they feel free of such restrictions. But with the rapid increase in world population and the growing percentage of people who live in metropolitan areas, these restrictions have become more and more pervasive. Public health and public order seem to demand such governmental impositions. Many behaviors which should be voluntary and self-imposed by people who are concerned about the general welfare now have to be legislated and enforced by the government. This has been the case for centuries, however, and what had at one time to be enforced by the state seems gradually to become taken for granted and a younger generation willingly and even unconsciously observes these forms of behavior. Nothing could be a more perfect example of the civilizing process in action.