

# A Brief History of Manners

by Paul Jerome Croce

There has been a lot of handwringing over the decline of manners in the last few years. Not over the big stuff, such as crime and violence and abuse of the environment which are, justifiably, the cause of larger laments. It's the erosion of small courtesies in daily interaction that produces an undertow of worry. I hear my colleagues complain about students packing up ten minutes before the class is over. Radio "shock jock" Howard Stern makes discourtesy a big business and weirdly "cool." And of course, no one likes mudslinging political campaigns (although candidates keep finding the strategy effective.)

When looking at manners and their decline, it is important to get some perspective. In one sense, manners are the small daily courtesies that serve as social lubricant. When people rub elbows with each other, there is bound to be some friction. Some people like each other; others have a negative chemical reaction, which can bring out some fairly violent instincts. Manners mixed into a bad connection can quell any possible fireworks. They let the two potential antagonists triangulate onto an impersonal "third party" of social rules of engagement.

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In our own day, these rules of courtesy seem like universal codes, even natural parts of our humanity. But a still deeper perspective shows that these rules are relatively recent in human history. There were no such things as "manners" in primitive cultures. The equivalent would have been behaviors governed by the awesome and sacred power of leaders and priests. The average person in this context did not so much show "respect" or conduct behaviors with courtesy but rather, acted in deference to absolute power.

A more immediate prehistory to our present condition is the rise of courtly behavior among the European aristocrats of the eighteenth century. Before that age of increased wealth and intellectual enlightenment, the noble classes were warriors whose chief claim to status was strength and the ability to fight. But Europeans by that time had accumulated enough wealth that their elite classes could live in a more refined way. Many of our views of mannerly behavior emerged in European courts of the eighteenth century. For example, the addition of the fork at meals, to be used instead of spearing hunks of food with the point of the knife, began with this elite class. This history fixed onto manners an overtone of elitism that it has never completely shaken.

Beginning with the American and French Revolutions and extending into the nineteenth century, manners spread beyond the courts and became democratized. Advice books and lecturers tried to convince average citizens to eat more politely and behave in more gracious ways. Manners kept their association with religion as churches and revival meetings taught not only the path to spiritual grace but also the ways to worldly graciousness.

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manners. Manners lost a lot of their refinement and elegance. It was less expensive to be mannerly in the nineteenth century than in the eighteenth, but it was also less grand.

Twentieth-century manners have lost even more of their associations with religion as they have more starkly become a fully secular social lubricant. Stripped of their aura of power and transcendent legitimacy, manners have become the clipped codes of smooth market relations. Phone solicitations begun with a cheerful first name greeting are eminently mannerly, but mask a bald pitch for money.

It is more tempting to act without manners in the late twentieth century, not only because they no longer grow out of contexts of universally accepted religious beliefs, but also because they are used so often to persuade against one's will. People are constantly faced with the insults of loss of power or status, and a mannerly response puts oil on the turbulent waters of their discontent.

We face a tall order. Our diverse culture must establish new ways to legitimize mannerly interaction without recreating elitism and authoritarian absolutes. A place to begin is by showing some respect for other people's values, even when they are different from our own—and who knows, we might actually learn something about our own values from seeing what's important to other people. That way mannerly behavior won't just ring hollow and be subject to skeptical dissolution, but will actually well up from a desire to live in community with people who at first glance may seem like aliens.



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