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## MANNERS

Cas Wouters

Erasmus advised not to spit on or over the table, but underneath it. Since then, spitting has become ever more restricted, until it has now been banned altogether. Today, in the West, even the urge to spit has generally disappeared. This example shows that manners are a form of social control demanding the exercise of self-control, and that the word abbreviates ways of relating to others and oneself. Yet only recently have manners become a serious object of study, major obstacles being a phoney ring and strong social pressures to present oneself as a natural talent. These made the topic seem too superficial and perhaps too strongly associated with certain behavioural problems of children and the *nouveau riches*. Only after Norbert Elias had "opened the door", as Kasson puts it, with his pioneering book *The Civilizing Process*, did the topic gain ascendancy. Manners have become the object of an increasing number of studies, and they are increasingly taken to be an important part of any culture: within the relationships in which they grow up, all are more or less attuned to the dominant manners of their society. In all societies, a regime of manners mirrors and reinforces the distribution of power, status or respect. The range of differences in respect, rank and power, whether between social classes, sexes or generations, can be deduced from such ratios as between formality and informality, strictness and elasticity, aloofness and intimacy, commanding and negotiating manners. Moreover, via manners, all are confronted with demands on emotion management, with social constraints toward self-constraints. Transgressions are sanctioned in a variety of ways, ranging from blame gossip to excommunication, all involving a loss of face, respect and self-respect. Thus, any particular regime of manners corresponds to a particular level of mutually expected self-controls, determining the range of accepted behavioural and emotional alternatives. Therefore not only are manners the symbolic expression of institutionalized power and dependency relationships and the ensuing problems of living together, but also of the emotion management or self-regulation that is demanded from the individuals who are trying to cope with these problems. Thus, changes in the spectrum of dominant manners refer to both social and psychological processes; they refer to changes in the regimes of power *and* emotions. It was from this perspective, that Norbert Elias wrote his important book. Taking European manners books from the fifteenth to the nineteenth century as pivotal to his analysis, Elias showed that in processes of state-formation and growing interdependency, the pressures people exercised upon each other and themselves have on the whole developed in a specific direction: ever since the Middle Ages a wide range of elementary

'animalistic' acts such as eating, drinking and sleeping as well as the more primary emotions and impulses, have become increasingly subjected to more - and more differentiated - regulations which have been standardized as laws and 'good manners'. Again and again, what was once seen as good manners, later became rude again, or was completely taken for granted. Via manners, expanding social constraints toward self-constraints have pressed toward stronger and more automatic self-supervision, the subordination of short-term impulses to the commandment of a habitual longer-term perspective, and the cultivation of a more stable, even and differentiated self-regulation. In this way, the chances of physical and psychological humiliation or annihilation have been lessened by a growing intertwining of social functions and interests. The development can be viewed as a long-term process of formalization: more and more aspects of behaviour and feeling were subjected to stricter regulations, partly formalized as laws and partly as manners. This long-term trend reached its peak in the 'Victorian Era', to be followed in the twentieth century by a dominant process of informalization: manners becoming increasingly relaxed, subtle and varied. The lessening of power inequalities and a growing expectation to proceed through mutual consent have been conducive to greater informality in manners. More and more manners have come to be ignored or attacked as rising groups came to be increasingly represented in the centres of power that function as a model for manners. These groups have demanded new behavioural alternatives for themselves, while at the same time limiting those of the old established groups. Behavioural extremes, expressing large differences in power and respect, came to provoke moral indignation and were banned, while for the rest the codes of social conduct have become more lenient, more differentiated and varied. Rising mutually expected self-restraints allowed for an increase of socially accepted alternatives: as all kinds of formal rules and emotional controls were collectively taken into individual custody, they were subjected to a 'controlled decontrolling'. Emotions that according to these formal rules previously had been repressed and denied, especially those concerning sex, violence and death, being 'dangerous emotions' that could lead to humiliation or worse, were again 'discovered' as part of a collective emotional make-up: there was thus an 'emancipation of emotions'. In increasingly dense networks of interdependency, more subtle, *informal* ways of obliging and being obliged, have demanded greater flexibility and sensitivity to shades and nuances in manners of dealing with others and oneself. As manners turned from a set of general rules into guidelines differentiated according to the demands of the situation and relationship, they demand and allow for 'doing it my way', i.e. a process of individualization. Reduced inequality of power chances will have always gone hand in hand with a relaxation of manners, but only in the twentieth century have processes of social equalization and integration reached such a scope and degree that a long-term informalization process has got the upper hand. The 'fin de siècle', the 'Roaring Twenties' and the 'permissive societies' of the 1960s and 1970s

showed particularly strong spurts in this direction. For the USA these spurts have been indicated by Hodges in an overview of changes in the literature on manners. On the whole, however, the study of the history of manners is still at an early stage.

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Possible cross-references:

civilization

emotion

individualism

longe duree?

mentalities?

ritual?

stratification