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# Etiquette and Manners

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Interest in the history of manners is fairly new and has grown together with interest in the history of emotions, mentalities, and everyday life, all of which only became serious topics of research in the Western world, from the 1960s onwards. Until the 1960s, manners were discussed mainly in the context of the 'problems' of behaviour among the lower classes, of children having to learn such things as table manners, as well as of social climbers and *nouveaux riches* who were usually seen as being too loud and too conspicuous. Since then, the topic has gained ascendancy and manners have become the object of an increasing number of studies. 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.

When it appeared in German in 1939, Norbert Elias's *The Civilising Process* was the first systematic study of the history of manners and emotion management. Pivotal to this work was an analysis of the extensive European literature on manners from the fifteenth to the nineteenth centuries. Elias focused particularly on manners regarding basic human functions such as eating, drinking, sleeping, defecating, and blowing one's nose, as well as on those regulating sexual and aggressive impulses. Because such manners are universal – in the sense that humans cannot avoid these activities or their regulation, no matter what society or age they live in – they are highly suitable for historical and international comparison.

Take the example of sharing a bed with a stranger. A manners book from 1729 warns that 'it is not proper to lie so near him that you disturb or even touch him; and it is still less decent to put your legs between those of the other.' In a few decades, to share a bed with strangers became embarrassing. The 1774 edition of the same book only noted that to be forced to share a bed 'seldom happens' and if it does: 'you should maintain a strict and vigilant modesty' (Elias, 2000: 137). As with other bodily functions, sleeping slowly became more intimate and private. From the mid-eighteenth century onwards, the code of the courtly upper classes was beginning to resemble the more general usage of later centuries.

In general, what was first allowed later became restricted or forbidden. Heightened sensitivity with regard to several activities, especially those related to the 'animalic' or 'first nature' of human beings, coincided with increasing segregation of these activities from the rest of social life: they became private. Again and again, what was once seen as good manners later became perceived as rude or, at the other extreme, so ingrained in behaviour as to be taken completely for granted. Social superiors made subordinates feel inferior if they did not meet their standard of manners. In this shaming process, fear of social superiors and, more generally, the fear of transgression of social prohibitions took on the character of an inner fear, shame.

Gradually, the social commands controlling such actions as sleeping, nakedness and excretion, came to operate with regard to everyone and were imprinted as such in children. Thus all references to social control, including shame, became embedded as assumptions and as such receded from consciousness. Adults came to experience social prohibitions as 'natural', emanating from their own inner selves rather than from the outer realm of 'good manners'. As these social constraints took on the form of more or less total and automatically functioning self-restraints, this standard behaviour became 'second nature'. Accordingly, manners books no longer dealt with these matters or did so far less extensively. Social constraints pressed towards 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, constant, and differentiated self-regulation. This is, as Elias calls it, a 'civilising' process.

According to his civilising theory, the main driving force of the directional process is the pressure of social competition and of an increasing division of functions, integrating increasing numbers of people into expanding and increasingly dense networks of interdependence. Elias emphasises the importance of processes of state formation, in which the use of physical violence and its instruments were progressively centralised and monopolised, together with taxation. Thus, the inhabitants of states were increasingly constrained to settle conflicts in non-violent ways, pressuring each other to tame their impulses toward aggressiveness and cruelty. Displays of superiority, particularly violent ones, were successfully branded as degrading.

With the rise of bourgeois groups who were no longer dependent on privileges derived from the crown, royal or 'private' state monopolies were gradually transformed into societal or 'public' ones. The transition was most dramatic in the American and the French Revolution in the late eighteenth century. The transition from the eighteenth-century 'courtesy genre' of manners books to the nineteenth-century 'etiquette genre' reflects this change. The new genre presented a blend of aristocratic and bourgeois manners. Etiquette books were directed at sociability in the centres of power and their 'good society', that is, the circles of social acquaintance among people of families who belong to the centres of power. Their manners serve as a model. To be introduced, accepted and entertained in good society was an important and sometimes even a necessary condition for success in business and politics. In the nineteenth century upper- and middle-class women came more or less to run and organize the social sphere of good society (Wouters 2004).

The period from the fifteenth until the late nineteenth century shows a long-term process of formalisation in which the regimes of manners and emotions expanded and became increasingly strict and detailed whilst a particular type of self-regulation in relation to a particular conscience-formation developed, spread, and became dominant. The long-term trend of formalisation reached its peak in the Victorian era, from the mid-nineteenth century to its last decade; the metaphor of the stiff upper lip indicated ritualistic manners and a kind of ritualistic self-control, heavily based on an authoritative conscience and functioning more or less automatically as a 'second nature.' This process allows to perceive the history of manners

in Europe and the USA as a long-term process towards the formalisation of manners and the disciplining of people.

However, while the trend towards restricting the expression of feelings of superiority and inferiority continued in the same direction, in other respects the trajectory of change in codes of behaviour and feeling was unique to the twentieth century. It points to a process of informalisation: 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. As rising groups came to be increasingly represented in the centres of power and their good societies, 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 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' (Wouters 2001).

Thus the overall emancipation and integration of 'lower' social groups in Western societies has been a necessary condition for the emancipation and integration of 'lower' impulses and emotions in the personality structure. Both emancipations demanded a more strongly ego-dominated process of self-regulation, because drives, impulses and emotions, even those which could provoke physical and sexual violence, tended to become more easily accessible, while their control became less strongly based upon an authoritative conscience, functioning more or less automatically as a 'second nature'.

The turn of the twentieth century, the Roaring Twenties, and the permissive decades of the 1960s and 1970s were periods in which whole groups collectively became involved in emancipation processes. They were also periods with strong spurts in the informalization of manners. A frequent misunderstanding is to perceive informalization as just the undoing of formalization. It usually treats see informalization as a synonym of 'permissiveness' and 'the permissive society', expressions that only refer to the loosening of social codes. However, to be able to 'let go' without losing control or run wild demands a higher level of self-control. Therefore, in contrast to growing permissiveness, the 'controlled decontrolling' or 'letting go' that is involved in informalisation processes raises stronger demands on self-regulation (or emotion management), thus demanding a higher level of self-restraint. The two processes should be disentangled, the tightening of restraints from the loosening of the social codes.

Increasingly 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 demanded and allowed for the shift from a 'second-nature' self-regulating conscience that to a great extent functions automatically, to a 'third-nature' personality with a more reflexive and flexible self-regulation. For such

individuals it becomes increasingly 'natural' to attune oneself to the pulls and pushes of both first and second nature as well as the dangers and chances, short term and long term, of any particular situation or relationship. As national, continental and global integration processes exert pressure toward increasingly differentiated regimes of manners, they also exert pressure toward increasingly reflexive and flexible regimes of self-regulation.

In the course of these centuries, the widening of the circles of readers of manners books reflected a widening of the circles who were directing themselves in terms of the dominant code, which, therefore, increasingly became the *national* code. These integration processes were carried by the successive ascent of larger and larger groups. As their status and power relative to other groups increased and they came to be represented in the centres of power and their ‘good society’, their members increasingly came to adopt the same code of manners and feeling, and they came to experience others as belonging to their own group or nation. Most changes in manners are related in some way or another to the representation of new groups in the centres of power and in good society. Apparently, codes of manners function to include some groups and to exclude others, but they also function to allow newcomers in. No group of established people has ever been able to keep its ranks entirely closed. The opening of the ranks of the established, the particular mix of ways in which these openings were to some extent forced and to some other extent offered, and the demands that newcomers had to meet – demands of social position, wealth, lifestyle, manners – have been different processes in each country. The specific processes of social integration in each country, particularly the ways in which the ranks of the falling strata of social superiors have been opened up *by* the rising strata – emancipation – and *to* the rising strata – accommodation – appear to have been decisive for the ways in which their distinctive codes of manners and self-regulation have influenced the type of mixture that finally resulted as the national habitus (Wouters 1998).

Some changes in manners, however, are symptomatic of changing power balances *between* states. As France became the dominant power in Europe, French courtly manners increasingly took over the modelling function previously fulfilled by the manners of the Italian courts. In the nineteenth century, with the rising power of England, the manners of English good society came to serve as a major example in many other countries. Around the turn of the twentieth century, according to many German and Dutch etiquette books, English manners had become the main model all over Europe.

After World War II, when the United States became a superpower, American manners served more easily as a model. Before that war, the USA had already been rising in this regard, in particular because of the relatively early development of a youth culture in that country, and of an appealing entertainment industry closely connected with it, summarised and symbolised in the name of Hollywood.

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