

THE RISE AND FALL OF CIVILITY IN AMERICA

From “shock-jocks” on the airwaves to shootings on the highways, the signs that civility in America is crumbling assail us. It is not only individuals who suffer. A democracy, more than any other society, is built on mutual trust and cooperation among strangers, on the street as well as in the meeting hall. Creating and sustaining such trust was an important public commitment of America’s early years, our authors write— one that we seem increasingly unable to make.



Detail from Susan Merritt's Picnic Scene (1853)

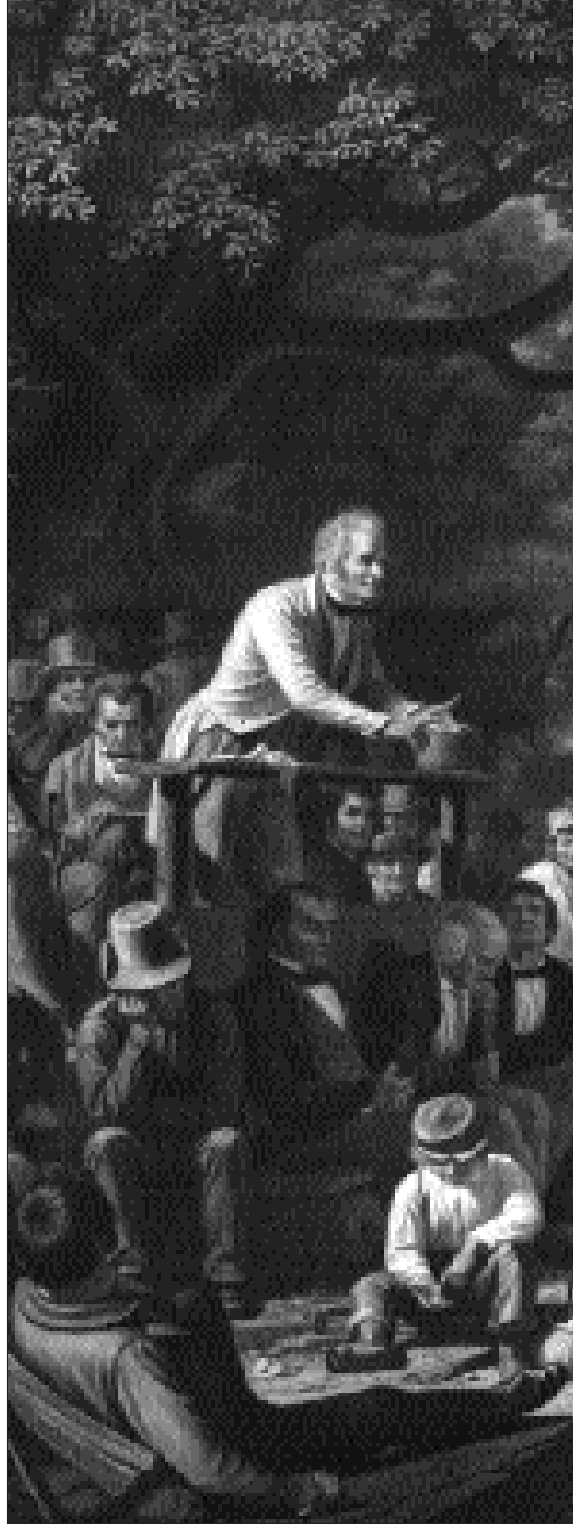
The Genteel Republic

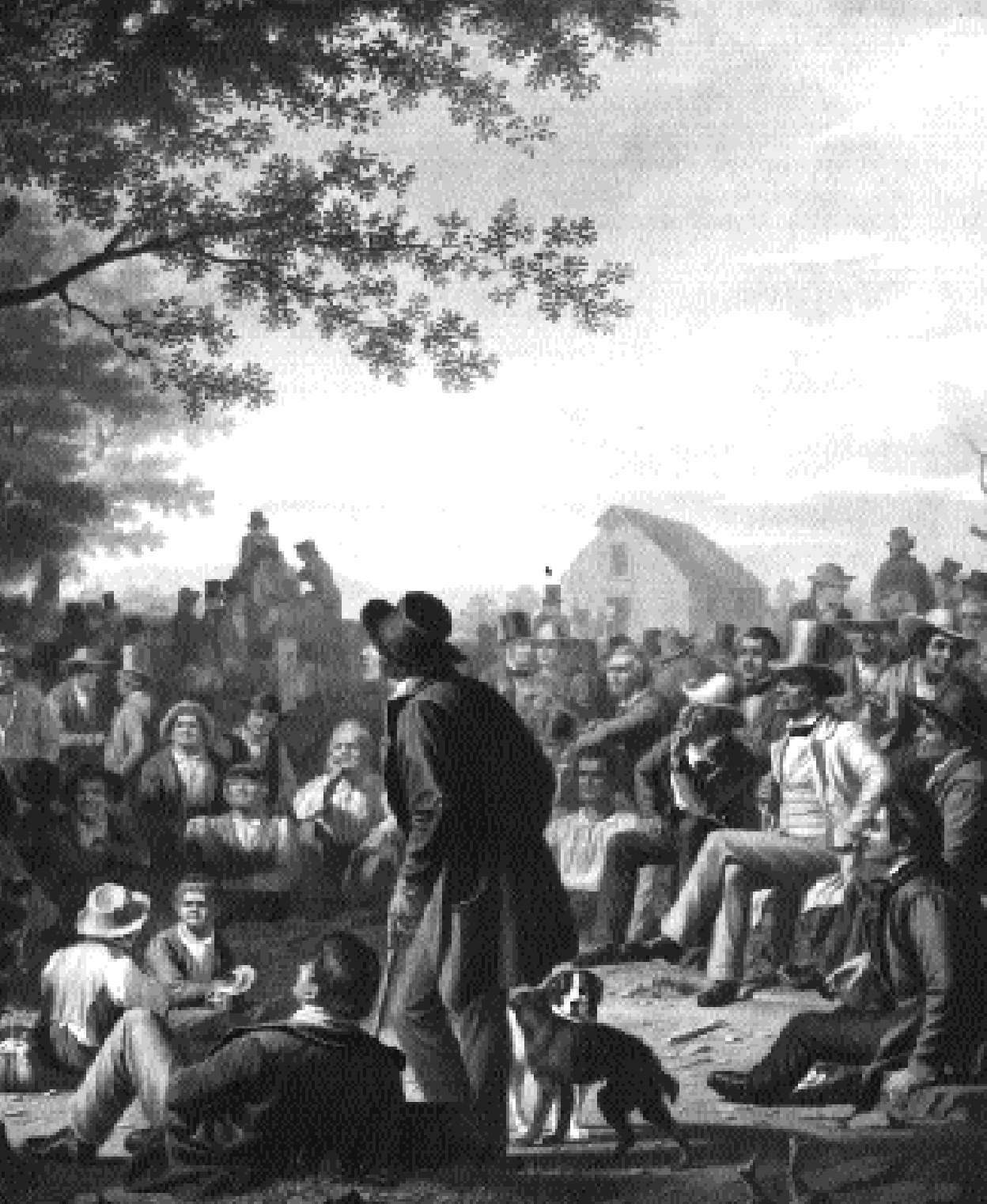
by *Richard L. Bushman*

Ours is not the first age to feel pangs of anxiety about the decline of civility, refinement, and manners. Two centuries ago, the currents of revolution stirred similar fears among many of America's Founding Fathers. To these creatures of the Enlightenment, living in their Virginia plantation houses and Philadelphia mansions, manners and refinement ranked with the rule of law, the development of science, and the practice of the arts as the greatest of civilization's achievements. In their darker moments in the years after the Revolution, as a continuing democratic revolution shook the traditional social order, many of the Founders worried that the United States was sliding into barbarism. Benjamin Rush, a Philadelphia physician and signer of the Declaration of Independence, complained that "the principles and morals" of the people had declined and that government everywhere had fallen "into the hands of the young and ignorant and needy part of the community." Rush went so far as to say that he regretted all he had done to advance the revolutionary cause. Thomas Jefferson, John Jay, and Samuel Adams were among the many others who voiced deep disappointment with the state of postrevolutionary America.

The Founders' consternation grew out of an anxiety foreign to us: they feared that refinement and democracy were contradictory. Gentility, after all, was the product of an elite culture, a way of distinguishing ladies and gentlemen from common people, and thus hardly suited to a republican society.

These fears, of course, were not borne out. The old social order of prerevo-





A common code of civility allows people of many different kinds to meet for political discussion in George Bingham's Stump Speaking (1853–54).

lutionary America did pass out of existence. Gentility, however, not only survived but prevailed, becoming an essential element in the success of America's democratic experiment. After 1776, the middle-class people who were empowered by democracy—middling farmers, well-to-do artisans, clerks, and school-teachers—laid claim to their own version of gentility. Encouraged by entrepreneurs eager to sell them the trappings of respectable existence, Americans installed parlors in simple houses, purchased carpets for the floors, drank tea from inexpensive creamware, planted shrubs and grass in front yards where

there had been weeds and packed earth, and bought books instructing them in comportment and etiquette. From this peculiar amalgam of republican conviction, capitalist enterprise, and genteel practice there emerged an anomalous society: a middle-class democracy with the remains of an aristocratic culture embedded in its core. It was a society uniquely equipped to reconcile the promise of equality with the unpleasant realities of economic inequality and social division.

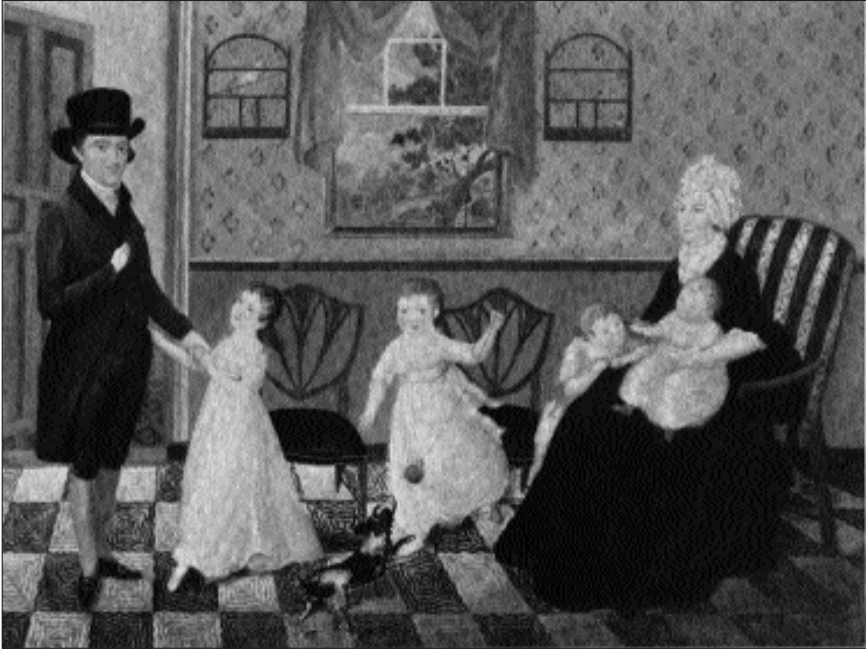
Gentility was not much on the minds of the first English settlers in North America. Their lives generally were governed by more austere religious codes, not to mention the austere material conditions of early colonial life. Then, at the end of the 17th century, a handful of merchants recently migrated from Britain built city houses in Boston and Philadelphia, houses that we would now call mansions. Soon substantial new dwellings in the fashionable Georgian style were going up in these cities and across the Virginia Tidewater, in Portsmouth, in the Connecticut River Valley, along the Hudson, and near Charleston. By the time of the Revolution, barely 90 years after Colonel John Foster built one of the first Boston mansions, every member of the colonial gentry felt he must reside in a mansion furnished with polished walnut furniture, creamwares, and plate—all ornaments of the genteel life.

These new houses were dramatically different from their predecessors. The homes of even the wealthiest people of the earlier era were cramped, low ceilinged, and dark. The new mansions tended to be taller, sometimes rising to three stories, with much higher ceilings inside. They were also more colorful. Earlier colonial houses were never painted, except occasionally for the door and window frames, and were rarely built of brick. The new houses often were red brick or, if frame, were painted bright hues of yellow, blue, and other colors. (Only much later did the white we associate with the era come into wide use.) The windows were large and numerous. The floor plan distinguished the great houses most of all. Where once the main rooms of even the finest house were used for working, eating, sleeping, and entertaining, now certain rooms were set aside strictly for a public purpose, the gathering of polite society.

The essence of gentility was a compulsion to make the world beautiful, beginning with the individual person and reaching out to the environment—houses, gardens, parks, even streets. Thus, even as they built grander, more refined houses, the gentry built new selves to inhabit them. As a boy of 10 or 12 in the 1740s, for example, George Washington was required by his tutor to copy “110 Rules of Civility and Decent Behaviour In Company and Conversation.” It was one of hundreds of “courtesy books” in circulation during this era. The rules covered a multitude of trivial behaviors: “In the Presence of Others Sing not to yourself with a humming Noise, nor Drum with your Fingers or Feet.” Many were regulations required in a deferential society: “In Company of those of Higher Quality than yourself Speak not ti[ll] you are asked a Question then Stand upright put of your Hat and Answer in few words.”

Even among the European aristocracy, the practice of bathing regularly and wearing clean clothes, much less attending to manners, was a relatively recent

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Everything in this family portrait, from the clothing to the light and open feel of the room, is emblematic of late 18th-century genteel style.

innovation. Now everything associated with the body was subject to genteel discipline. Rule after rule told the young man to keep his mouth closed, not to let his tongue hang out or his jaw go slack. The firm, composed mouth, so indelibly associated with Washington, was the facial posture of a gentleman, a model for the treatment of the genteel person's entire body.

Washington's manual was one of literally hundreds of such books that circulated through Europe and its colonies from the 16th century onward.* Indeed, most of Washington's 110 rules were derived from an Italian manual, *Il Galateo*, first published in 1558. In Europe, the courtesy books were used to instruct young gentlemen preparing for life at court or in the households of noblemen. The books facilitated a crucial transition in the organization of power in Europe, from the feudal system of weak kings to a system which, by the end of the Renaissance, made kings the focal point of military, political, and social power. Nobles who had once ruled with nearly unchecked sovereignty over their own domains were now compelled to attend the monarch at court, where polished manners and beautiful appearances were needed to win favors and privileges.

Gentility was more than a decorative flourish adorning life at court. It was a form of power, a means of gaining favor and of asserting cultural superiority. Lawrence Stone, the great analyst of the English aristocracy on the eve of the Civil War, concluded that the 17th-century aristocracy nearly spent itself to extinction in an effort to keep up appearances under King Charles I (1625–49). They had to refine themselves, their houses, and their entire style of life to

*The word *genteel* itself derives from the French *gentil*, which entered English usage twice, first in the 13th century when it turned into the English *gentle*, and again in the late 16th century when, traveling to England along with the new ideas about behavior at court, it retained more of its French pronunciation and became *genteel*. The word was linked to a number of kindred terms: polite, polished, refined, tasteful, well-bred, urbane, fashionable, gay, civil.

maintain their positions at court and in society. Gentility thus arrived in the colonies with an honored pedigree and a mission. It was the culture of the court, of all that was considered high and noble, of the finest and best; it was also an instrument of power available to all who wished to claim it. No group needed such an instrument more than the colonial gentry, whose authority was built on the unstable foundation of wealth rather than inherited rank.

But the power of gentility cut two ways. To claim it, the gentry first had to submit to an exacting discipline. Gentility required the construction of mansions, demanded that parlors be furnished with walnut furniture, insisted on the best manners. It was not, moreover, a discipline undertaken merely for personal aggrandizement. Genteel conduct had a public as well as a private purpose. The purchase of beautifully decorated objects was not the whim of wealth or simpleminded mimicry. These objects and the forms of behavior that accompanied them were instruments for achieving a higher mode of living, a way of being polished, refined, civilized.

The genteel idea cut hard against the grain of many of the ideas and forces that pulsed through America in the years around 1776.

Nothing could have been more alien to the spirit of gentility than capitalism, with its demand for disciplined work, frugality, and self-denial. “A Cottage may keep a Man as warm as a Palace; and there is no absolute Necessity of covering our Bodies with Silk,” declared a writer in the *New York Weekly Journal* in 1735. “Is there no quenching of our Thirst, but in Chrystal? No cutting of our Bread, unless the Knife has an Agate Handle?” This is the voice of capitalist rationality elevated into moral injunction. Protestant ministers at times added their own critical voices. But republican politicians were probably the loudest critics. Gentility was an affront to the basic egalitarian impulse of republican culture. “Pray Madam,” John Adams asked his neighbor Mercy Warren in January 1776, on the eve of American independence, “are you for an American Monarchy or Republic? Monarchy is the genteelest and most fashionable Government, and I dont know why the Ladies ought not to consult Elegance and the Fashion as well in Government, as Gowns, Bureaus or Chariots.”

Adams went on to say that an American monarchy “would produce so much Taste and Politeness, so much Elegance in Dress, Furniture, Equipage, so

much Musick and Dancing, so much Fencing and Skaiting, so much Cards and Backgammon; so much Horse Racing and Cockfighting, so many Balls and Assemblies, so many Plays and Concerts that the very Imagination of them makes me feel vain, light, frivolous and insignificant.” A republic favored other qualities, Adams said. It would



Etiquette manuals proliferated during the 19th century. Here, readers are warned against “ungraceful positions” in the parlor. Figure no. 1, for example, “stands with arms akimbo.”

“produce Strength, Hardiness Activity, Courage, Fortitude and Enterprise; the manly noble and Sublime Qualities in human Nature.”

A revolutionary opposition can either destroy the culture of the preceding ruling class or appropriate it. In the American Revolution, the choice was appropriation. While many of the elite despaired at the prospect of vulgarity coming to power, others worked at polishing society. In the years after the Revolution, for example, museums were founded to elevate the public taste and reformers pushed for the creation of public schools, where manners were taught along with the three R's. Instead of obliterating genteel culture, American democracy allowed ordinary people to make gentility their own.

Once appropriated, gentility was turned to democratic purposes. In the colonies, gentility had set apart a small elite of wealthy, educated ladies and gentlemen who lived in the great houses, dominated society, and occupied high government offices. Now everyone could possess gentility. Everyone who could adopt genteel manners and exhibit a few of the outward signs of refined life—perhaps a parlor carpet and a cloth on the dining table—could be respectable. In the 18th century, “ladies and gentlemen” designated a distinct class of people who stood apart from the rest. Before long, farmers, minor artisans, clerks, and schoolteachers all answered to that name. By the middle of the 19th century, it included everyone who attended a circus.

What drove this transformation was a popular desire to emulate those who stood at the peak of society and government, to dignify one's life with a portion of the glory that radiated from the highest and best circles. But the extraordinary growth of gentility in the United States would not have been possible without the unlikely alliance that was forged between gentility and capitalism.

Gentility gave Americans a reason to buy the goods that capitalism produced, and capitalism in turn democratized gentility by turning out and energetically promoting affordable versions of the goods that genteel living required. The growth of the gentry during the 18th century by itself fueled startling economic gains. In the 19th century, the spread of refinement to a much larger segment of the population vastly enlarged the market for manufactured goods. Thousands of Americans now needed damask, silk, and fine woolens to replace the rough homespun once deemed quite adequate for dresses and suits. They required curtains for their windows, carpets for their floors, chairs for their parlors, paint for their clapboards, plantings for their gardens. Gentility, in short, established a style of consumption.

The volume of this increased consumption is not a matter of guesswork. In rural Kent County, Delaware, for example, less than 10 percent of those of middling means who died shortly before the Revolution left mahogany, walnut, or cherry furniture—the fancy kind used in parlors and dining rooms. Of those who died 70 years later, between 1842 and 1850, more than two-thirds owned such furniture. There were similar sevenfold increases in virtually every other kind of genteel household good. No one who died in Kent County on the eve of the Revolution owned a carpet; 70 years later, everyone in the top quarter of the population did, and more than half of the two middle quarters. Similar growth was seen in ceramic dinnerware, bed linens, looking glasses, clocks, and carriages. After the Revolution, Kent County's story was repeated all over the new United States, as striving families amassed the essential tokens of genteel living, creating a vast new market for consumer goods.

Just as gentility created a market for the goods produced in the industrialists' factories, so it facilitated a peculiar kind of equality. The greatest threat to

democratic equality was capitalism itself, with its vast payoffs for successful businessmen and its relatively meager rewards for most others. Indeed, industrial growth under capitalism depended on great inequalities of wealth to facilitate the accumulation of capital that made large-scale investment possible. From the Revolution to the Civil War, economic inequality in the United States grew increasingly severe, until by the end of the period, the upper 10 percent of property holders controlled more than 60 percent of the wealth. If wealth alone were the measure of success, as unadulterated capitalist culture implied, then the United States was a profoundly unequal and undemocratic society.

But moderating this view of human achievement were genteel cultural values that measured human worth differently. One might not be able to live in the same neighborhood as an Astor or a Biddle, but it was nevertheless possible through diligent effort to lay claim to an equal place in “respectable” society. This view was actively promoted by writers, preachers, and other reformers who worried about class divisions in the 19th century. Catherine Marie Sedgwick, a popular New England novelist, wrote that “there is nothing that tends more to the separation into classes than difference of manners. This is a badge that all can see.”

Sedgwick told uplifting stories of poor men who managed to live genteel lives despite their poverty. Mr. Barclay, the manager of a New York print shop in *Home* (1835), lives frugally in his modest tenement but spends some of his meager pay on good books, music, and drawing lessons, and sends his children to dancing school. When an acquaintance questions the dancing lessons, Barclay replies, “There is nothing that conduces more to ease and grace, than learning to dance.”

Like Sedgwick, Frederick Law Olmsted, the designer of New York City’s Central Park, thought culture was the solution to the problem of inequality. “We need institutions that shall more directly *assist* the poor and degraded to elevate themselves,” he declared. People like himself had to “get up parks, gardens, music, dancing schools, reunions, which will be so attractive as to force into contact the good and bad, the gentleman and the rowdy,” in hope of uplifting the latter. Olmsted’s inspiration was the landscape architect Andrew Jackson Downing, whose ringing 1851 manifesto “The New York Park” set Olmsted’s course when he laid out Central Park later in the decade: “The higher social and artistic elements of every man’s nature lie dormant within him, and every laborer is a possible gentleman, not by the possession of money or fine clothes—but through the refining influence of intellectual and moral culture. Open wide, therefore, the doors of your libraries and picture galleries, all ye true republicans! . . . Plant spacious parks in your cities, and unloose their gates as wide as the gates of morning to the whole people.”

Many 19th-century Americans took up the challenge and sought to add elements of refinement to their lives. Sedgwick’s publisher said her three volumes were “one of the most popular series of works ever published.” They were successful because hundreds of others were propagating genteel values through etiquette books, magazines, and novels. The tidal wave of print flooding the country bore images of genteel life into every corner of the land. All literate persons were exposed to good manners, and even more were exposed to the ornaments of genteel existence by shopkeepers, peddlers, and, later, mail-order catalogues.

The spread of genteel culture muted the class question in the United States,

softening divisions between rich and poor and between employers and employees. Any household whose members could learn to wash their hands and to blow their noses with a handkerchief, who could boast even a small parlor and an appreciation of flowers, could claim membership in the middle class. The adoption of the culture of the upper classes, even in rudimentary form, made it possible to claim membership in the same cultural order.

Many were left out to be sure, but many found their way in. Large numbers of working-class people by the late 19th century had parlors, and some even had

pianos in them. Their incomes might have been miniscule compared to what those in the better areas of town enjoyed, and their opportunities might have been limited, but they were not of a different order of life. Income differentials in the United States to this day are vast, and yet a huge proportion of Americans identify themselves as middle-class.

There was much in the republican vision of Sedgwick, Olmsted, and other reformers that was unrealistic. The notion that farmers would learn to draw beautiful pictures and write verses was naive. There was also much that was unforgiving. Their vision, generous though it was, excluded all those who failed to embrace their standards. Olmsted set strict rules of behavior for his new park in Manhattan. It was not to be a beer garden, he warned, and park-goers were to act like ladies and gentlemen—or else stay home. He asked a lot from a poor, rudely educated population, constantly augmented by immigrants. A large portion of the American populace still looked on gentility with scorn or indifference as an alien culture. Many lacked the means or the understanding to emulate their betters. African Americans fared worst of all. In Philadelphia, New York, and Boston, many of the black urban elite—schoolteachers, barbers, ministers, and artisans—embraced the genteel promise only to find that it brought them no closer to equality.

Yet the middle-class idea—the belief that proper conduct could lift a person into the ranks of the respectable—exerted a powerful influence in the United States. It was transmitted through virtually every channel of society to every corner of society, reaching down to the ghetto schools where immigrant children were tutored in the ways of the new country. As the population of the country's cities swelled from about 10 million in 1870 to some 54 million in 1920, the premium on simply getting along in public grew. Poor and working-class people had their own ways, but there was no question where the weight of public opinion lay. Around the turn of the centu-



Breakfast is served: "Citizenship Lessons," a 1920s series of stereo cards showing recent immigrants how "average" Americans live, promoted high standards of behavior.



Old manners and morals meet new in Paul Sample's Church Supper (1933).

ry, writes historian John F. Kasson, in the new movie and vaudeville theaters that brought together people from many different walks of life, uniformed ushers patrolled the aisles to maintain decorum, sometimes handing out printed cards admonishing offenders not to talk or laugh too loudly. “Gentlemen will kindly avoid the stamping of feet and pounding of canes on the floor, and greatly oblige the Management,” one said. “All applause is best shown by clapping of hands.”

Gentility's hold was not eternally assured, of course. Even as gentility reached its zenith as a cultural force around the turn of the century, its foundations were being undermined. From Freud on, we have been made to believe that the dark passions—lust, greed, fear—are the realities of human life, and that civilized refinement is a thin veneer covering raw forces below the surface. At best, gentility could be seen as a tragic necessity. The assertion that it is a measure of human progress, along with the rule of law, art, and science, long ago ceased to command assent. After Freud, it was also possible to insist—and many have—that gentility is a mask disguising our true nature, best ripped away to allow a more authentic self to emerge. Although hardly the belief of everyone, this conception of human life prepared the way for the counterculture's celebration of “authenticity” during the 1960s, with all of its continuing fallout for American society.

The genteel idea was moored not only in ideas. Throughout the 19th century, it was continuously reinvigorated by the presence of an aristocracy in Europe that was still considered the embodiment of elevated life. The writers of courtesy books cited the manners of the “best people” as their authority, meaning the European aristocracy and the American social elite that tried to imitate it. American captains of industry in the 19th century could imagine no greater glory for their daughters than for them to

marry lords. But bit by bit the aristocrats forfeited their illustrious standing, and today even the royals are more notable for their scandalous escapades than their social graces.

Since the retreat of aristocracy, no cultural authority has emerged to take command of conduct and consumption. Instead of buying goods to emulate an imagined superior society, people consume for pleasure, sensation, efficiency, therapy, comfort—a host of desirables—following the whims of magazine writers, admen, pundits, preachers, and pop psychologists. No unified authority presides over culture as it did in Washington’s day. Pleas for a return to civility grow out of a vague sense that social life deteriorates without good manners, not out of a serious commitment to submit the sovereign self to “society.” The word *genteel* itself is now a stain rather than a mark of distinction, signifying an excessive concern with nicety, a preoccupation with mere appearances, a refusal to face the hard realities.

With its intellectual and social foundations weakened, gentility may seem doomed to extinction. But it is premature to conclude that courtesy will lose its hold on our conduct altogether. Because it is held in place mainly by habit, there is no telling its fate in the long run, but an early death seems unlikely.

Although we lament the decline of manners—and observers were issuing such laments even in the Victorian era—gentility has been transmuted rather than obliterated. More than ever, social life is a performance in which, like the gentry of colonial America, we pay heed to appearance, albeit with dress-for-success apparel or fashions from the Gap. All over the country, people expend endless effort on manicured lawns to show their beautiful houses to best advantage and spend significant sums on exotic olive oils and other goods that advertise their cultural sophistication and refinement. Every respectable house must have a room where guests can be entertained and where the good china and silver can be put into play. And while we no longer admire the aristocracy, we still have superior societies that inspire emulation and striving. Part of the magnetic attraction of Ivy League universities is the aura they project of a higher and better society. Obtaining an Ivy League degree is the modern-day equivalent of marrying a title. The Ivies house the new aristocracy.

Powerful cultural forces such as gentility gather momentum over the centuries and roll on through inertia alone. This is as true of malign forces, such as racism, as it is of benign ones. Good cultural habits as well as bad ones are not easily broken, especially when they are taught in childhood. Middle-class children are still made to endure dancing schools, piano lessons, and endless instructions in behavior. Their parents know that at crucial points—applying for a job, interviewing for college, meeting a fiancé’s parents, impressing the boss, persuading a customer—manners count. Civil behavior, an effort to please, regard for others’ feelings, and virtually all the other principles in George Washington’s courtesy book still give an advantage. Our belief in civility may be too often honored in the breach, but until it no longer influences the way children are raised, gentility will endure, bruised and wounded perhaps, but very much alive.

Democracy Beguiled

by James Morris

The United States was not born civil. Its citizens learned how to behave themselves, in public and in private, over the course of a century and more. They did so by acceding to a homegrown version of the rules that had polished and made fit for social engagement their European forebears. A lively and instructive book by John F. Kasson, *Rudeness and Civility: Manners in Nineteenth-Century Urban America* (1990), traces the gradual erasure of the rough edges on Americans and their transformation into smoothies fit for artful maneuvering in the big city. The 19th century was the great age of etiquette education in the United States and saw the publication of hundreds of manuals on manners and behavior. Kasson notes that “the most complete (but by no means definitive) bibliography of American etiquette books” includes 236 separate titles published in the United States before 1900. The conduct advocated by these manuals is presumably the mirror image of the conduct they meant to dispel. Why urge readers not to wipe their teeth with the tablecloth if the practice were not a routine mealtime gesture for some significant number of diners?

The demand for the etiquette manuals was immense because so many Americans were at once unsure of themselves and, characteristically, determined to improve. And history hustled them along. They built their confidence and self-assurance to fit the boundaries of the nation’s growing and sophisticated cities. There was a continent to be tamed, a society to be brought to heel and to the table, immigrants wanting to fit in, get ahead, gain acceptance, be taken for granted, be taken for everyone else. Americans taught themselves how to act at work and play, courting and visiting and consoling. The rules of engagement proliferated and were accepted. Indeed, many Americans came to believe that, after marking the surface, the rules also inscribed the soul.

Propriety kept its 19th-century momentum through most of the 20th. But, as this century runs out of years, the feeling grows that America may be running out of civility and has suspended the rules that once set the terms for acceptable behavior and taste. To be sure, manners are not dead or vanished from society. You have only to watch how most people treat each other in most public social situations to see that. Indeed, we may even be experiencing a current boomlet for them (at 497 pages, the latest Miss Manners volume, *Miss Manners Rescues Civilization*, carries weight, on coffee tables at least). Manners are a little winded, though, and in need



In our faces

of a sit-down and some space. If the society is plainly not Dodge City, neither is it the New Jerusalem. Manners continue to evolve, as always, and to shift and take new forms. They are fashion, and each age's fashion is another's eccentricity. They are aesthetics, and few things are as mutable as taste. You can't expect a nation of 260 million souls to have the homogeneity of a neighborhood block association.

Manners have only superficially to do with the right fork and the timely acknowledgment. Observing the old formal rules of etiquette—the ceremonies with gloves and hats and calling cards and permissions to visit, with drafting and answering invitations, with remarking on every success and sorrow—has always been less important than instilling a sensibility of concern and regard. And that more valuable interior sensibility is showing signs of erosion. There exists an uncertainty about critical norms of conduct and aesthetic judgment, and a reluctance to define or invoke them. One consequence has been a widespread, and usually unwitting, coarsening of behavior.


Some of the boorishness derives from the traditional need of the young to demarcate their behavior and provoke some outrage, when they fear all the options to shock may already have been exercised. In off-road vehicles borrowed from their parents, the young make a rebellious stand between the Harleys and the Evian concession. Their best revenge may be a supreme ease with the technology that scares their elders. But who could have foreseen the tribal craze among the young (and the not-so-young) for tattoos and piercings? This is novel. Will the accessorized ear yield to the lopped-off ear, as long hair yields to short? Some bodies are so laden with interpolated bits of steel that you wonder how they manage at airports. What does the attendant do when keys, change, lip-

stick, beeper, bracelet, and watch have been removed, and the curious detector, pointed waistward and lower, still hums in the presence of a hidden stimulus?

Willful disfigurement of the body is thus far at the extremes of expression, but nonviolent display also speaks volumes. Consider how people have allowed themselves to be turned into human billboards. They have the taste (and the money) to buy the best brands of clothes and all the trimmings, and they want the world to know. Crests and emblematic ponies were once sufficient clues to their savvy. No longer. The names of shrewd designers now travel their bodies in packs, across chest, over back, up pant-leg, along pocket, round the side of socks and the waistband of underwear. We wear more tags than kids sent off to camp.

Films of Americans in public (at a baseball game, say) until as recently as the 1960s suggest the crowd is under the sway of an alien force. The women wear blouses and skirts or dresses or, more formal still, suits—and hats, hats, hats. The men are suited too, and hatted row after row to the horizon with brimmed felt jobs, deftly creased. When the crowd rises to cheer or groan, its emotions may become unbuttoned, but its jackets do not. (The art of this movement is lost.)

What has happened since the 1960s? The subsequent scrapping of the rules, the wholesale revision of expectations, has let women wear the pants if they want, zipped or not as they choose, and maybe even ripped. It has rendered the male suit and the felt hat as archaic as tights, doublets, and a wizard's cone cap; they're now the regular habiliment solely of morticians and lobbyists.

 n men, the wide-billed cap, once proper to Little Leaguers, truckers, golfers, and street gangs, has won universal acceptance. In the Mercedes or the pick-up, doing the town or doing the wave, at the market and at the museum, strivin' or just hangin', it has become democracy's very chapeau, morphing distinctions of class and wealth and race and age and sex and interest and fashion sense. It sits on every other head, turned every which way—backward, sideward, aslant—to signify youth and rakishness and insouciance, and frontward when the staff at the nursing home finally make it so and the wearer is not up to recourse.

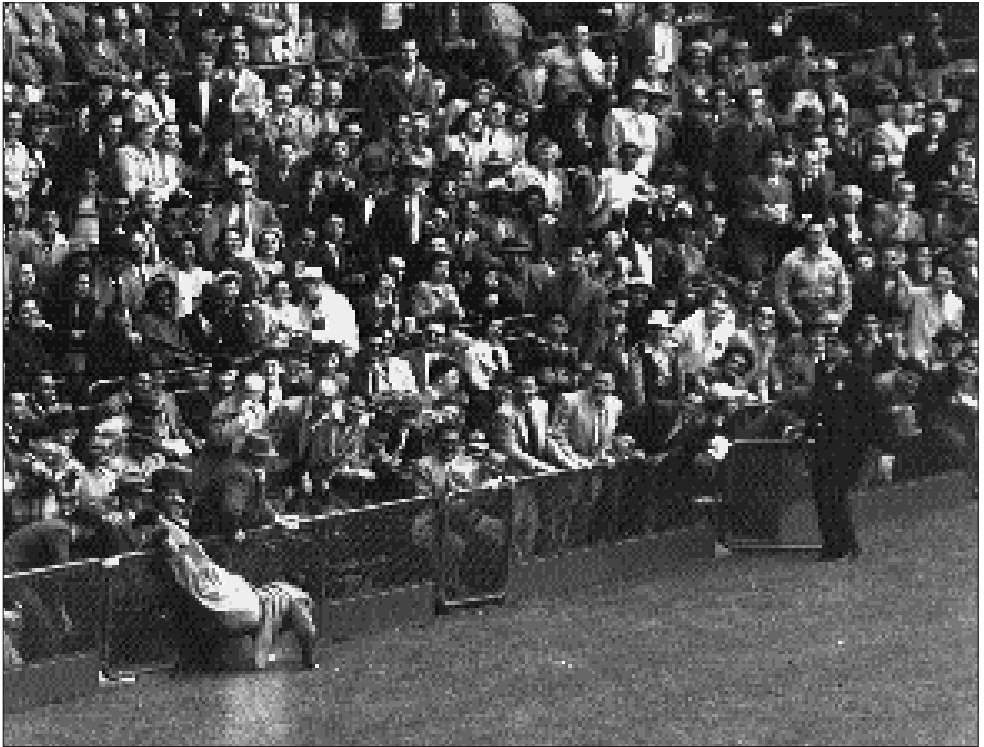
The change in fashion traces an evolutionary lurch in social behavior. People appear in public in clothes that must scare the hangers in a dark closet. The thonged foot, the hairy leg, the shorted thigh, the Spandex-cradled bottom, the polo-shirted paunch, and the chain-encrusted chest are familiar companions on plane and train, in shop and theater. Sweat-suited grannies ride the rails. Americans have been released from the tyranny of stodgy formality, goes the familiar line of defense. It's no wonder adults who believe this cannot sit in judgment on their children. What child would take them seriously? (Not that they have to: "Not in front of the children" now comes out "So, kids, what do you think?")

Some Americans show as little concern for their privacy as for their dignity (and not just those who admit on TV that they can't be left alone with farm animals). On bikes and park benches, on the street, in the air, at restaurant tables, in lobbies and waiting rooms, ordinary Americans now

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speak freely into trim devices. They speak with no self-consciousness, contemporary to the core, and they speak loudly, as if they need to be heard over an explosion or a garage band. (The decibel level of the entire culture has been raised, thanks to technology.) It's doubtful that the etiquette of the cellular phone has been codified yet, much less widely published. So why the sense—at least in some—that what these voluble solipsists are doing in public is a touch crass, though they store their technology in a cashmere pocket or in a niche on the dashboard of a Bimmer? Perhaps, beneath the raucous surface of the age, against all its steep tilt toward informality, there still runs a vein of old refinement, its location a matter of instinct (and sensibility).

In this age of “whatever,” Americans are becoming slaves to the new tyranny of nonchalance. “Whatever.” The word draws you in like a plumped pillow and folds round your brain; the progress of its syllables is a movement toward surrender and effacement, toward a universal shrug. It's all capitulation. No one wants to make a judgment, to impose a



What strange force compelled this crowd to wear jackets, ties, and dresses to a 1950 baseball game in Brooklyn, New York?

standard, to act from authority and call conduct unacceptable. But until something like that begins to happen, until standards of intelligence and behavior are defined and defended once again, we had better be prepared to live with deterioration.

The diffidence of manners bobbles along in the slipstream of the larger decline in taste. What we are enduring is not the end of taste, or the end of manners, but simply the ascendancy of questionable taste and regressive

manners. Was it on another planet that a campus free-speech movement in the early 1960s rubbed traditional sensibilities raw with the sandpaper of four-letter words? In polite society, the words are now as natural as breath. Their power to shame, to anger, to provoke, to wound is gone. It has passed, oddly, to possessives like “his” or to words schoolkids once tossed like stones—stupid, fat, ugly, crippled, queer—the mindlessness of their cruelty now judged to be full of harsh intention and ripe for judicial settlement.

But to imagine a past time of exquisite courtesy and refinement, if not 50 years ago, then 100, or 123, is to regret a world of bubbles. That world, if it existed, is as vanished as a politician’s promises, and not worth tears. Other decades had their own absurdities, to which they were blind, their own prejudices that prescriptions about manners helped sustain. In perpetuating the dream of a golden-age post-World War II America—where homes and lives were ordered in rows, where fathers wore ties and got home unrumpled every evening for dinner with the family, and mom’s apron was never smudged despite her kitchen duties, and boys played baseball and tag and, reluctantly, the piano, and girls read books and talked on the phone and slapped any stray male hand—let’s not forget the reality of the kids you were told not to play with, the people who could not be invited to dinner, the topics that could never be discussed, the Sears-sized catalogue of actions that were “shameful” and “unforgivable” and “unmentionable.” Would anyone really trade the present, disheveled as it is, for that speciously safe, ignorant, constricted past?

The answer to the question, of course, is “Yes, *someone* would.” And that’s the crux of the problem. No standard of conduct can be everyone’s standard without causing, in some quarter, resentment and, ouch, diminished self-esteem. Pressured to tolerate all difference and every individuality, Americans are slow to shift the value of any self from democracy’s gold standard. The openness is, at once, America’s glory and the clouded fleck that brings imperfection to its clear eye.

Responsibility—blame and credit both—for changes in national social behavior is not easily assigned. For each cause you catch, another ducks round the corner. Still, from a line-up of suspects (peppered with decoys), you might identify three and argue a case. They do not carry all the responsibility, nor do they collude. But their presence in the same place and at the same time has been of some consequence. The three? A popular culture of immense reach and marketability; modern technology, the innocent bystander made unwitting accomplice in the culture’s manufacture and sale; and maybe even democracy itself.

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American popular culture gets trotted out so often as the cause of every woe that it risks winning victim status. This culture—trivial, galvanizing, engulfing—deserves no sympathy. It needs scrutiny instead, because it has become so powerful and so seductive, so dexterous at shaping taste and attitudes and behavior, so difficult to avoid or to counter. The floodgates that once kept popular culture in check—including a presumptive self-censorship on the part of its purveyors, and a much narrower pre-TV access to markets—no longer function; they’re rusty



Drawing by Wm. Hamilton; Copyright © 1971 The New Yorker Magazine, Inc.

*“But, darling, many very successful young revolutionaries—our own
Thomas Jefferson among them—dressed for dinner.”*

with disuse and stuck in an open position.

The country may not get the behavior it deserves, but it does get the behavior it countenances. If violent movies drew no audiences, they would implode and vanish. We actually debate the availability of assault weapons in the society and their allowable firepower. Should the hordes of music groups whose names associate them with violence, or the calculated—to budgets and to box office—and increasingly strained violence of movies come as a surprise? The culture jumbles real death and play death, and both are losing their sting. (Even the meek drive like Messala out to teach Ben Hur who’s boss.)

America accepted the unbuttoning of the 1960s, the me-ism of the ’70s, and the aggression of the ’80s, and it has coddled the practiced cool of the ’90s. Suddenly, we’re all grown-ups here, as imperturbable and understanding as seraphim. Sights that not so long ago would have left audiences open-mouthed with wonder leave them droopy-eyed with boredom. To every age, perhaps, its proper surfeit: in old Rome, worried impresarios probably cut deals for more spears, more tigers, more Christians.

For 30 years, at every stage of the culture’s coarsening, the change has been deplored, at least by some. To no avail. The worthlessness of much of this culture now seeps into the carpet where we step, and we track the residue into every room. Movies, music, television, newspapers, magazines dwell routinely on topics once too hot for whispers. The first prime-time premature-ejaculation sight gag debuted on network TV early one evening last season. And there followed . . . indignation? A crusade? An apology? Nothing of the kind. Nothing at all, really. The black hole of the acquiescent culture sucked the moment in without trace or resonance. If everything can be said and anything can be joked about in a format that beams the speech and the action to tens of millions of homes, why are we surprised that

decorum, civility, courtesy, and taste suffer? No single incident makes much of a difference; the sum of them makes a revolution.

We fail even to notice how radically the terms of the discussion have changed. Sexual promiscuity, for instance . . . no sooner are the words written than one wonders whether the concept still exists, though the practice does. Vulgarity washes over little old ladies, and they shake it off like seals. They would never dream of using such language themselves, and they deplore its pervasiveness, but what can be done?

Pop culture is without malicious intent. It does not mean to topple the society it lives off. It exists only to divert and to turn a profit, not to make a lasting contribution to civilization. (Although that can happen accidentally: Aristophanes did not calibrate his topical humor to scholarship 2,500 years off.) Its traditions have the shelf life of bread. Pop culture thrives on novelty and has to keep pushing the bounds of the accepted to admit the novel. On the compass it uses to locate what the society can be persuaded to accept, the needle heads always to true profit. The motives for the public's acceptance and essential complicity are probably complex. At least, let's hope so. But they are for psychologists, anthropologists, sociologists, and economists to read—texts for whole troops of “ists.” The amateur will note only that each age tends to define itself against its predecessors: “To this they said no, so we say yes.” Novelty lies most often in the direction of the outrageous—the previously unspeakable, unsingable, unwearable, unshowable—and only occasionally, through exhaustion, as an aberration, toward reserve.

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Technology inhabits our age as comfortably as a rent-controlled tenant. It has captivated us. Understandably. We take transforming technological advance for granted. Nothing seems astonishing, only inevitable. We engage with the technology actively at times, as at a keyboard, and passively more often, when we see the world as it is cut to fit a TV screen and a TV mentality, or attend movies that would be unthinkable without technology and that technology in other guises persuades us are cultural events. These movies make hundreds of millions of dollars, in this country and around the world. The coarsened sensibility that appreciates them in America is also one of our leading exports.

The technology is gloriously indifferent, but it has been co-opted by the single-minded commercialism of pop culture to affect attitudes and behavior. Technology provides modern markets a life-support system. Bit by bit, byte by byte, it helps craft the consumer soul. The culture could not be so invasive without technology to lend it a saturating power: TV airs a trailer for a movie whose stars are then interviewed later that evening, a week before the movie opens and is written about in magazines and newspapers, just as the soundtrack makes it to music stores and product tie-ins crowd the counters of burger chains or float in the vast flea-market of the Internet. Before long, a single company will own the network, the movie, the stars, the press, the music company, the plastics factory, the abattoir, and the cyberspace. “Tie-in” is indeed the operative term—tie in and across and up, till the public is bound and submissive. A common taste is created for products, events, candidates, amusements. The sadism of the process is no less noisome for its being accomplished with good old American grit and

flair. But self-control is one basis for manners, and incessant manipulation takes a toll on the sensibility that informs behavior.

Americans believe their freedom to choose is limitless; they do not consider enough how the agenda of choices they are presented, no matter how crowded, frames their terms for action. Advertisers speak of consumers as “targets.” Segments of the public are shot right through with arrows of desire. Some targets you only hit, and some you destroy in the process. An advertising campaign may flirt with pornography, but what’s the difference if the ads succeed? Across the pages of magazines, a rogues’ gallery of fragile young men/women, linked in a conga line of pointless sexuality, have opted for a new cologne over bathing. They do not look nice to be near. But, ah, the target group is struck. Over every televised second of noble achievement at last summer’s wounded Olympics hovered the buzzards of commercialization and spin, to co-opt emotion and swoop and pick at will. Here was the authority of the marketplace in regalia to humble a king.

We surf so quickly through fashion that, in their desperation for novelty, some designers of the 1990s even looked to the 1970s. They were drawn again to disco wear—the shoes so high they lessen oxygen, the pants so wide their wayward whip saws the air. Only to a parched imagination could the 1970s suggest rain. Needs are planted, nurtured, harvested, and then plowed over, to be replaced with tomorrow’s cravings. Affections shift and are easily won, as among adolescents. Nothing is accorded an enduring value—it is this month’s model only—and the consequence is to flatten the value of everything.

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How else does the culture deaden taste and affect behavior? You can find examples in the commonplace. Consider the absence of aesthetic value in the design of everyday items. Their function is all. The comfortable private environment of the old phone booth—a seat at just the right level and, as the folding door was shut, a light that brightened automatically and a little fan that blew from a top corner—is now just myth. Rows of phone booths have been replaced by rows of nakedly public phone modules, objects of industrial design and probably industrial strength, that resemble urinals hoisted and clamped to a wall. A phone booth invited polishing; a phone module needs hosing down.

An impatience with properties that distract from the substance drives too much contemporary design. Look at what has happened to pens and shavers and watches. Most of these objects exist to be replaced. The function, not the appearance, matters—as it matters just to get the food down, dash through the door first, have your shouted say over others’ whispers.

What’s aesthetic defers to what’s economical. Theaters have been stripped of detail and reduced in size, and the ceremony of visiting them has diminished. The extravagance of theaters built in the days before television had a civilizing effect. It created an environment where people were made to feel privileged, however briefly, and where they socialized accordingly. Who feels social in a polyplex unit the size of a rec room, with a screen barely larger than a TV’s, a half-gallon of soda wedged through a hole in the arm of your

seat, an oil drum of popcorn locked between your knees, your eyes glued only intermittently to the screen but your feet stuck securely to the floor? The aesthetic dimension of ordinary ritual is lost. The experience *tout court* is what's important. The curlicues that might embellish it have as little relevance as the flourishes that are manners.

This coarsening of the society is an indulgence. It is not the old honest coarseness of frontier settlers removed from society and struggling with bears and the seasons. It occurs in a land of plenty that has turned inward because no external crisis poses a mortal threat or diverts its attention from self. The mirror is its closest friend, and eventual worst enemy. Expectations of daily material entitlement beyond the dreams of Americans 50 years ago are routine. There is simply more *stuff* in America, everywhere in America, not just among the rich, who lead lives of unprecedented ease, but among the majority middle class, and even among those whom official statistics identify as the poor. Because their choices look so prodigal, Americans believe they enjoy great freedom. Yet their movement, random and deliberate, occurs within parameters to which the market governs entrance (and from which it guards egress). In an age of rampant self-esteem—when a book entitled *Yes! You!* could be an exhortation to weight loss, an accountant's degree, the Air Force, or a corporate takeover—Americans have suffered a diminution of self-respect and become a spawning ground of appetites. To say that America is an unbuttoned, liberated society because it appears to have no use for codes of behavior that once supported repression and hypocrisy is to pay insufficient attention to the hold a technologically empowered market has over us. Its grip is the essence of beguilement.

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Manners, like taste, are dependent on an acknowledgment of authority, and, in a vigorous, strutting democracy, authority can be hard to come by. Without being Martin Luthers exactly, Americans concede it only grudgingly. The “says who”/“who are you to say”/“this is a free country”/“that’s just your opinion” line of thought runs like a fault through the society. Rather than rush to judgment of social behavior, as was once all too common, we rush from judgment, disposed to justify or overlook the most appalling lapses. The unthinkable has become not just thinkable but option #2. There are few implausible alternatives anymore in America. If you kill a parent, there’s probably a good reason, and a smart lawyer will help you to remember it.

Criteria and authority are suspect. Direction and control bear the taint of “fascism.” We are reluctant to say “enough” and be accused of that most mortal of all contemporary sins, “imposing your values on others.” The absence of a fuss by any but those who are called “extreme” eases the way to further transgression. And the purveyors will up the ante next time. No one wants to point a finger, and charity’s gain is probably the nation’s loss.

What’s being lost is the sense that there can be national norms for ordinary behavior. A nickel notion of democracy and difference, as if respect for every view meant that no view goes unchallenged, threatens to absolve us of the need for civility. It’s leveling the nation to the mean. In the sphere of manners and behavior, this embrace of democracy’s most superficial

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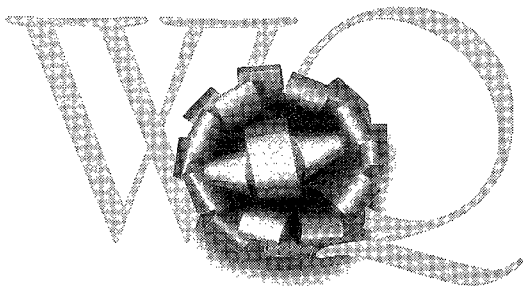
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The tyranny of indifference

appeal—its lavish distribution of acceptance and random freedoms—may, perversely, fragment the society. It's a corrosive benignity. It dulls democracy's sharper and truer reality, which depends on honest debate and on differences not indulged but subordinated and sometimes over-ruled.

Allow that behavior is just cultural and that its norms are constructed. So what? Our whole lives are lived among constructions, and if societies are to be ordered and interesting, they need rules and goals and judgments and prohibitions, not fixed for all time but stable enough to inspire and temper behavior and supple enough to slip their bonds when reason counsels change. Manners are the face we turn to the world, and looks, of course, can deceive. Most times they do not, if only because most people lack the will and the wit for sustained pretense. What you get is, to a substantial degree, what you see.

Some poems are shapelier than others. Some cars ride better than others. Some teams prevail. We routinely invoke standards against which we measure achievement of every sort. So why do we hesitate to discriminate among forms of behavior or to set standards for day-to-day conduct—not legal standards but mere, invaluable, social standards? The answer invokes the vastness of the country, the heterogeneity of the population, the integrity of the individual, the arbitrariness of all standards, the impossibility of consensus. And yet we permit commercial forces to shape consensus daily.

The idea that calling attention to bad manners is itself unmannerly and that one should teach by the example of one's own propriety is valid on paper and in monasteries. Is it really plausible that the boom-box bearer sharing his taste in music with the population of a large city will look around and think "Wait a second, no one else's luggage is throbbing"? That chatterers at a movie will suddenly feel they are being left out of the general silence? That strangers to either side of you on a plane who decide from their respective window and aisle seats to begin a courtship across your chest will realize they haven't looked at the complementary flight magazine? That the woman at the opera who can extend the unwrapping of a lozenge to fill all the longeurs of *Parsifal* will learn to act with Rossini-like dispatch? These people and the hordes of their thoughtless compatriots across the land require immediate attention. Let the saints teach by example. Ordinary crusaders have their own lesson plans and know that Americans are better taught by a neatly turned put-down or an undeleted expletive.

But a posse of decorum vigilantes loose in the land is a stopgap measure at best. Manners are a legacy of education, and the society's failure is in its reluctance to provide education, in and out of a classroom, that can be trusted to instruct the young about the world and its history, the nation and its context, to instill critical discrimination and an ease with nuance, to set the terms for everyday conduct, and to rank bad, better, best. An adequate education should leave you on perpetual alert, accustomed to raising the possibility, like a flare at a disaster site, that what you are being told is nonsense, even if it's hardbound and best-selling, and what you are being sold is junk, no matter its label's cachet. Thus guarded and prepared, you will move through the society with a reserve that, at the least, intends no offense.

Then again, who knows? Shaggy-haired parents breed buzzcut offspring, and maybe fashion will gyre around again to old-fashioned coded rules of behavior—the spell broken, incivility deplored. It's more probable that manners will survive as an exercise of intuition, an uncertain progress along the wall of a dim alley. So long as a vigilant sensibility guides the steps, ignorance of what's peripheral is unimportant. All the good will in the world cannot decode the functions of a cadre of utensils in drill formation around a plate, and shrimp may get taken with a cake fork. But the untutored may nonetheless say "thank you" for favors and dress each request in a "please," rise from a bus seat and will it to another, defer instinctively to age and beauty, speak low and woo persuasively.

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Several decades ago, placards with the single word THINK began to appear on desks and walls. The encouragement should have been unobjectionable, but the bald injunction sounded ominous. This new age needs a softer directive. Perhaps plain old CONSIDER (three syllables, to wrestle the three of WHATEVER). The word first turns us inward, toward reflection, before it sends us out to share in the teeming, indifferent world.