Bad Manners in America

By Amy Vanderbilt

Abstract: The widely held contention that American manners are uniformly bad is not tenable. The very mobility of American society brings into sharp focus the bad manners of the minority, thus making bad manners seem to be the norm. The sharp delineations between classes are less important as proponents of exemplary manners and mores. The changes in etiquette frequently come from other sources. Higher education does not necessarily result in culture. Education and social grace are today not necessarily synonymous. The decline of the mother's influence in the home has meant the decline of what was once known as "ordinary" manners among America's children. Because of many economic pressures, we are living more simply, with less formality and a minimum restriction upon the family. The pattern of meal-taking has changed drastically. There is a blurring, too, of the difference between the sexes, with a resulting difference in our approach to manners between them. "Society" has taken on many meanings and is influenced by geography. Reduction in service has been one of the most striking changes in our society, along with a great change in our attitude toward language, from which "indelicacies" have virtually disappeared. The Negro revolution is making, and will continue to make, a great change in our manners and mores. The admission of new peoples into our social stream has made changes in our behavior. We have become increasingly forthright. Our etiquette is changing. When developing manners are deemed "bad," they are usually modified because bad manners make people uncomfortable.

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ARE American manners bad? A large chorus of yeas will readily attest this, but whether it is true or not is a moot question.

Perhaps, like many things, bad manners are relative—like middle age, for example. Bernice L. Neugarten, Professor of Human Development at the University of Chicago, points out that in America "middle age" is considered to be between forty and sixty and that this group makes up almost a quarter of our population, earning more than 50 per cent of its personal income and wielding important social power. "They are the decision-makers," she points out. Moreover, the span of middle age is enlarging. The fifty-year-olds are much more youthful than their parents were. But middle age, well-defined as it is in America, is not an absolute either. The middle-aged intellectual dependent upon his brain, Professor Neugarten says, is not comparable to the manual worker, who considers his age in relation to his physical strength, and thus might consider himself middle-aged at about thirty-five. And so it is with manners. There are few absolutes, and much is to be taken into consideration in this fascinating field that touches on sociology, anthropology, psychology, and many more of the social sciences.

AFFLUENCE AND SOCIAL MOBILITY

Thorstein Veblen's *The Theory of the Leisure Class,* first published in February, 1899, is a classic whose truths still apply to our society. This comment certainly does:

> The standard of living of any class, so far as concerns the element of conspicuous waste, is commonly as high as the earning capacity of the class will permit—with a constant tendency to go higher. The effect upon the serious activities of men is therefore to direct them with great singleness of purpose to the largest possible acquisition of wealth, and to discountenance work that brings no pecuniary gain.

We are an upward-bound, highly mobile society. It is this very mobility that brings into sharp focus the bad manners of the minority and makes them seem those of the majority.

No longer are there the sharp delineations between the classes which made normal both the rough manners of the working class and the fastidious ones of the wealthy. Today, the people with money may have attained it so quickly that they have not yet absorbed even the most rudimentary rules of etiquette. There is, indeed, room at the top, and the onslaught to reach the pinnacles has leveled the social leaders. Our fads and our fashions are much more likely now to come from the bottom of the ladder than from the top. Movie directors, ordering their female stars to be photographed hatless because hats cast unbecoming shadows and dated the photographs, were undoubtedly the initial cause of the downfall of the hat. Interestingly enough, not many photographs of Mrs. Kennedy in a hat have appeared since she left the White House, and her husband, according to the complaints of the hat industry, usually carried only a token hat, which rarely sat upon his head. It has long been recognized by fashion experts that many innovations in men's clothes—and they are proliferating now—originated among homosexuals and eventually infiltrated into the most conservative circles, although I doubt if one can buy an amulet at Brooks as yet, and, at this writing, they do not carry blue dinner shirts, let alone yellow ones.

Samuel Johnson, as quoted by Boswell, said: "Every one of any education would rather be called a rascal than accused of deficiency in the graces." Today, with higher education—not necessarily resulting in culture—the norm rather than than the exception, education and social grace are not necessarily synonymous. College house mothers write me that young men and

young women enter college ignorant of many of the simplest courtesies—for example, how to use a knife and fork without offense, how to perform introductions, and how to conduct a dinner-table conversation.

THE SEXUAL REVOLUTION

The breakdown in manners of our young people—not *all* of our young people, just some of them—has come about as a result of many things. Consider this one factor. In 1965 the number of adult working women rose to 25.5 million, and most of these were married. One out of every three married women works in a job outside of her home. The ratio of adult working women to men is one to two.

A revolution in homemaking and child care has been going on—none too quietly. Houses are not necessarily homes. Although the average American today owns his own home, the families are smaller than they were at the beginning of the century; houses are smaller; and mother, the traditional teacher of manners, is more likely to be at work to help support the family, or busy at community activities, rather than with her children, teaching them by precept and example (the best way) what are considered "ordinary" manners.

Whereas a woman used to spend half of her time cooking, she now has—thanks to instant foods, frozen meats and vegetables, and other time-savers—more time for a life of her own. Her family actually eats less than did the average family at the beginning of the century. The family consumes many of these meals hastily, standing up in the kitchen. Small houses have little storage room for linens and china, so sit-down meals, when they occur, are presented more simply. Courses are fewer. There are few, if any, servants. There is less and less conspicuous consumption of food. More and more, we are eating to live. And this kind of living means less and less formality, a minimum of restriction upon the family, and the simplification of the ceremony of meal-taking.

There is a great crossover in the responsibilities, and even in the appearance, of the sexes as a result of the pressures upon us. Look at two young people walking down the street, perhaps both in shirts and dungarees. If the sexes differ, can you tell from the rear? Is it the supposedly rising confidence of women and the increase in feminine aggressiveness that has shaken the male and blurred his picture of himself? There are fewer differences between the sexes, and this has brought about a difference in manners, but not necessarily an increase in *bad* manners.

The emancipated young woman of today does not expect her escort to treat her as if she were fragile. She is glad when he suggests that he enter a small car first so that she will not have to wriggle across the seat, especially if she is in evening dress. If she smokes and he does not (very likely these days), she does not really expect him to carry matches to light her cigarettes. If she is a working woman, she may well be accustomed to paying for a business lunch for a man or a group of men, none of whom will be in the least bit embarrassed when she takes out her credit card or quite openly lays cash on the table. There is more honesty, less hypocrisy, between the sexes, and this, to conservative older people, may often seem bad manners. Whether or not these manners are bad, we may expect more of them.

"INSTANT INTIMACY"

There is a kind of bad manners which I deplore. This is the kind which results from people's having risen too quickly on the financial scale to absorb

(as they are fairly sure to do in time) the nuances of social intercourse.

We have come a long way from the day when a woman addressed her husband as "Mr." Instead, we have what someone has called "instant intimacy." Even at very large parties, hardly any last names are heard at all. Europeans, who are reserved in such matters, are shocked at being called by their first names upon introduction to American circles. I have had hostesses refer to me by my first name to their servants. Thousands of people who have read my work write to me, "Dear Amy." Some of the newspapers carrying my column encourage people in this by heading what I have to say "Amy Says" instead of using the caption that my syndicate gives them, "Amy Vanderbilt's Etiquette," thus neatly breaking down the very authority that they wish to advance. Once in Fort Lauderdale, a little boy about six years old came up to me at a charity benefit and said, "Miss—I mean, Amy—may I have your autograph?" Our presidential familiarities are, or have been, "Ike and Mamie," "Harry," "Jackie," "L.B.J." President Kennedy's dignity managed to discourage such tags.

My mother lived for forty years next door to a neighbor who never called her anything but Mrs. Vanderbilt, yet they could not have been closer friends. My father and this neighbor's husband never called each other by their first names, despite warm respect and close friendship.

Napoleon Bonaparte went to great lengths to establish family names, by edict at that. Do we want to descend to being a country of Bills, Bettys, Marys, and Joes? How many times have you spent an evening in a group where you never did hear a last name, only to be asked the next day if you had enjoyed meeting Mrs. ————. This Mrs. ———— may well have been a woman to whom you had been talking all evening but whose last name you had never been told.

In Denver recently, I was discussing these matters with a friend, who replied with an experience which she had just had in a high-quality restaurant. The bus boy had leaned over her and said, she thought, "Would you like some iced tea, dear?" She turned to her friend and said, "That's strange. I thought he said, 'Would you like some iced tea, dear.'" The bus boy leaned over even farther and said, "You heard me the first time, sweetheart."

What is the defense, you might ask, against such instant intimacy? A friend of mine solved it by saying to the dishwasher repairman who had just called her "Dear": "I am 'dear' to my husband. To you, I am Mrs. Smith." Although he probably did not come in response to her next call, she certainly had her inning. My advice is to fight it.

It is bad manners to rush at people with instant intimacy. Once it has happened, it is difficult to discourage, especially in the case of representatives of businesses which employ instant intimacy, gearing their approach to "the masses" and regularly insulting all classes. Has, for example, a magazine subscription salesman not called you by your first name on the telephone, hoping to trick you into thinking that you know him—or her—and thus into giving him a sale? These illustrations of instant intimacy are all examples of bad manners, offensive to most people of education and culture.

MANNERS AND SOCIAL CHANGES

Society, in the old sense, no longer exists, but manners—good and bad—definitely do. Society is such an amorphous word. It means one thing in a small town and another in a big city, one thing in London and another in Sydney, Australia. Geography, annihi-

lated by the jet airplane, mixes it all together, confounds all rules, and confuses everybody. As Gerald Carson said in *The Polite Americans*:

Hostesses no longer expect Old World manners from their guests. But there is a minimum below which it is not safe to fall. The yawn should be covered. An open mouth in rhythmic motion is still not pleasant to view. Pointing and personal questions are just as much under the taboo as they were in the Victorian age. It is still useful to know how to go down a receiving line, whether asparagus is a finger food, and what to do with an artichoke.

He adds:

With all that has been thought and said about American conformity, regional folk ways continue to thrive. A man driving a car across the United States doesn't need to wear a tie to be seated in any eating place in those parts of the West where the management offers a second cup of coffee free. But when a tie-less young nuclear engineer tried to enter the dining room of a beach club on Long Island, he got a beating for his uncouth manners. . . . Cigarette smokers are not expected to ask permission to light up anymore. But pipe smokers should be careful about pipe dottle and sucking noises. . . . An ashtray, even if it is silver and bears an aristocratic crest, even if it came from the Excelsior Hotel in Florence, makes many nonsmokers ill if filled with used cigar butts. "One has no right to inflict a disgust upon another" was a rule of gentle behavior a century ago. It holds today.

Mr. Carson's comments are trenchant, but I must take issue with him on the matter of pointing. One of the first things one taught a child was, "Don't point," but I have in my files photographs of all kinds of world leaders, pointing. They do so at the order of news photographers who try to get a little action into photographs. Agreed, they rarely point at people, but the photographic "point" has caused a change in etiquette just as fashion photographers' arranging of shapely legs has long since made obsolete the etiquette injunction that a lady cross her legs only at the ankles. Legs crossed at the knees, it seems, make a more attractive picture no matter what a woman's age or condition.

Reduction in service has been one of the most striking changes in our society, bringing with it, quite obviously, much simpler forms of entertainment and, in public places like the great hotels, a great deal of "do-it-yourself" co-operation on the part of the guest. In many a hostelry, one does not ring for ice anymore, or even set-ups, but one goes to the door at the end of the hall and there on the landing of the fire stairs, one finds an ice-dispensing machine and, probably, soft drinks in an automatic vendor. In 1896 the great Brown Palace Hotel in Denver, which is still one of the most elegant hostelries in America, had as its guest a $50,000 fox terrier who went to Colorado for his failing health. He was given a seven-room suite—the Brown Palace's finest—and was attended by a maid who looked after his every need. Today, the majority of great hotels are so short of servitors that that luxury, the turned-down bed of a guest, is almost unknown. And any woman guest who wants to take a *bath* should be careful to take along her own can of cleanser. With the showerers supposedly in the majority, the bathers, it seems, should not expect a really clean bathtub.

In the years since the turn of the century, children have even ceased to look like children, let alone behave like them. Yet, many transformations have been for the better. It hardly seems possible that, as late as 1922, Lillian Eichler in *Etiquette Problems in Pictures* showed the correct mourning attire for a widow and a child. She commented:

Young children should never wear full mourning. The child in mourning for a parent should wear white frocks with a black sash, black hat and black shoes and stockings. . . . Both mother and daughter are devoid of all jewels, although a dull jet pin is not considered incorrect. . . . Children may return to brighter colors sooner than adults.

The chaperone disappeared, of course, almost as long ago as did Mrs. Grundy, and it amazes us to find in an old etiquette book, *Good Manners* (1889) that:

In New York society a gentleman does not ask a young girl for the pleasure of attending her to the theatre or opera unaccompanied by her mother or chaperone. He may give a theatre party and invite the mother of one of his lady guests to act as chaperone, though it is considered desirable that one of his married relations should also be present in the capacity of hostess, it being too much, in theory at least, to impose the chaperonage of more than three or four girls upon one matron on such an occasion.

It seems quaint indeed to read in Lillian Eichler's book:

It is not correct to ask a woman what her address is after having met her only once. Continue the friendship by arranging theatre parties, with mutual friends, if you wish, but never ask permission to call until you have met her several times.

Today, the reverse of this advice is in effect. Young males of dancing-class age are, in our big cities, automatically given reduced rates for, or are permitted to attend free, the fashionable dancing class for which the parents of their more numerous sisters pay handsomely. At debutante balls, it is now customary for the debutante to have *two* escorts, for whom her parents pay. One desperate mother told me that when she finally married off her daughter, scarcely any of the young people who were invited bothered—if, indeed, they knew how—to reply to the wedding invitations. It was necessary for her to phone the hoped-for guests to see who would attend the reception. Wedding receptions, these days, are rarely produced from within a household, but are the production of catering services, who must know how many "heads" they will feed. They set deadlines for this information, and then charge whether or not the guest appears. Thus originate the nightmares of the mother of the bride.

Again, Mrs. Eichler wrote, in 1922: "The well-bred person does not wear diamonds in the afternoon, with the exception, perhaps, of a small broach or ring. The correct time to wear diamonds is in the evening, and at an extremely formal and ceremonious affair." Today, perhaps because of the proliferation of diamonds or because of the influence of Texas (where I have seen multiple diamond bracelets on the same arm in mid-morning), diamonds are worn day and night. There is a story, perhaps apocryphal, about a newcomer to a great family who, at Bailey's Beach, at the turn of the century, was told by a disapproving dowager that diamonds really were not worn in the morning. "That's what I used to think, too," the young person is said to have replied, "before I had 'em."

Where modesty once concerned itself with diamonds, it ceases to concern itself even with the human body. Certainly, bikinis have gone about as far as they can go. In fact, the prognosis is no tops at all in the near future, a fashion which Rudi Gernreich introduced, for the sake of the front-page publicity, no doubt, several years ago. Transparent blouses are beginning to be seen, at private cocktail parties, at least, in cities that pride themselves on sophistication. The tut-tutting is now being directed at men, some of whom

have reached a stage of wild fashion experimentation, festooning themselves with junk jewelry in a feeble, or at least meretricious, imitation of Camelot.

The language of our generation has become so free—on radio and television, in public and in private—that even grandmothers have become shockproof. This is quite a departure from *The Ladies' Guide to Perfect Gentility* (1859), which stated flatly: "A lady should never seem to understand an indelicate expression, much less use one." There are modern novels freely available that seem to be written only in four-letter words. Graffiti have come out of the men's rooms, and so, by constant exposure, are losing their impact. That excellent searcher into our mores Norton Mockridge has just published a book on graffiti, called *The Scrawl of the Wild,* which tells much about our times. Denmark, having rescinded its laws against pornography, finds business in this category now very slow. Fresh air blows through the market place.

SOCIAL INTEGRATION

What is being called, and I believe rightly, the Negro revolution, has made, and will continue to make, great changes in manners, mores, and what might be called the color pattern of our country. In 1964 a Negro victory that received wide notice, did not, perhaps, make the impact that it should have. It concerned a case in an Alabama court. An attractive and articulate young Negro woman named Mary Hamilton, field secretary for the Congress of Racial Equality, refused to answer questions of a prosecutor who addressed her merely as "Mary." Her case, finally decided by the United States Supreme Court, established Negroes' right to be addressed by the courtesy title of "Miss," "Mr.," or "Mrs." in all American courts. Negroes everywhere rightly considered this decision a major victory. Miss Hamilton said: "To be addressed by his first name is one of the major discourtesies paid to Negroes. It's the equivalent of being called 'boy,' 'girl,' 'Hey, Joe.' Negroes resent any white person who does it." She went on to say, "Friends in the South tell me white insurance agents and clerks are now calling their customers by courtesy titles." Certainly, the custom is now established everywhere. The Negroes' growing economic strength will resolve many such inequalities.

Negroes have won many rights. They are no longer relegated to the back of the bus in Southern states. They may not be denied food or lodging or admission to any public entertainment. In time, we will be a completely integrated society. Social integration, particularly in Northern cities, is observable on all sides, particularly among young people of college level. I have observed social integration among professional people, to a slowly increasing extent, over the past twenty years, even though much of it is sheer tokenism. It is dramatic, however, because the Negro cannot hide. Whether he will be absorbed into an overwhelmingly white majority in this country (80 per cent) or, with the rise of Negro pride, retain his own physical and social individuality, remains to be seen. I remember reading in Collier's, about 1955, that it was then estimated that two milllion Negroes were "passing" into the white population each year. Where is this blood now? Perhaps in your own family somewhere, along with the blood of countless other races. There are no "pure" Americans. Amram Schienfeld, author of *The Human Heredity Handbook,* says, "If at any time any human group was or is 'superior' in any respect, one could as easily ascribe this to their having been not pure but mixed, as in the case of Americans, one of the least racially

'pure' and most genetically mixed nationalities the world has seen." Today, many a politician marks as a plus an Indian ancestor, once considered an impediment. Who knows whether, in another two hundred years, our political leaders will be exploiting some infinitesimal drop of vigorous Negro blood.

I noticed in Denver recently that many pretty young Mexican girls were running elevators and working in shops. I commented to one of them: "I didn't know there were so many Mexicans in Denver." She looked at me aghast. The Denverite accompanying me explained afterward: "I should have warned you. Mexicans here don't like to be called Mexicans. They are all 'Spanish-American.'" In Mexico itself, when I first visited there in 1945, social families stressed their Spanish ancestry and refused to consider that they had any Indian blood. Now the pendulum has swung the other way, and Indian blood is a great asset both politically and socially, or, as for the latter, if it is not always an asset, it is at least quite admissible.

The admission of new peoples into our social stream, as the result of wars, acquisitions, revolutions, and persecutions, has made enormous changes in the way we do things. The in-coming groups, which originally clung together for mutual support, slowly fan out, taking with them their own culture and mixing it into the American social stream. A few years ago, an advertiser called me and asked me to do a television commercial for blintzes. I must have sounded amused at the juxtaposition of the name Vanderbilt and blintzes (although I love them), for the man said, somewhat huffily, "Blintzes are no longer an ethnic food." Is there, equally, an American table that does not have some form of pasta several times a month, if not once a week? Is not Chinese food in cans or in the frozen food departments everywhere? Is the consumption of chili confined to the border states? Are not the airwaves filled with cries of "schlemiel"? Do we not speak of "hutspuh"? There is even a dictionary of Yiddish for Americans. The minority groups—Italians, Irish Catholics (one of those became President of the United States), Poles, Hungarians, and Puerto Ricans—have been absorbed very rapidly. In New York, Spanish is a second language, just as it is in San Antonio. Police and firemen must study it. I went to register to vote, and several people in line spoke to me in Spanish just as a matter of course. *Platinos,* Cuban black beans, snails, potato pancakes, and bean shoots are in our larders, along with baked beans, hot dogs, turkey, and cranberry sauce. When we entertain on nearly formal occasions (and that is about all that can be managed these days), we no longer feel that the menu must be exclusively French. The linen napkin at our dinner tables is at the mercy of a laundress, if any, and it is more than likely that it will be replaced by a paper one (something that the Japanese have always considered more sensible and sanitary).

The social pages of our newspapers have undergone a great change. Where, at one time, only a very circumscribed section of society ever found itself in these sacred areas in the great papers of the big cities, we now find complete social integration. Most of the Jewish weddings take place on Sunday. And those of the socially powerful families are duly reported on Monday. Negro brides, tastefully photographed in proper regalia, are shown. True, these are still mainly the daughters of professional men and women and are themselves, like their grooms, graduates of leading colleges. There are changes in wedding customs as a result of lost WASP (White-Anglo-Saxon-Protestant)

predominance in society functions. Some of these considered bad social usage (the return card in the wedding invitation or the coupling of divorced parents' names in the invitations), may, in a few years, well be standard procedure.

The truth is that the bad manners of one generation are the acceptable, or even the good, ones of the next. Just after the Civil War, it was necessary for established society to invent the R.S.V.P. (*Répondez s'il vous plaît*) in order to indicate to the *nouveau riche* who had not had the proper social training that a reply was expected to a formal invitation. Now, the R.S.V.P. is standard. The present problem is how to get those people who understand what R.S.V.P. means (and *that* was a delicate use of initials because it implied that the recipient knew French) to answer at all.

We are an increasingly forthright people. We discuss things under social circumstances that could never have been mentioned in a previous generation. Limbs are legs: circumlocutions are less needed. The nose, needing blowing, is blown without apology, but in *The Care of the Person, Manners, Etiquette and Ceremonials* (1870), we were reminded:

> The nose is the most prominent and noticeable feature of the face, and, as its functions are not all of the noblest kind, it especially behooves people who desire to be nice to avoid drawing attention to them. Consequently, all its requirements should be attended to in the quietest and most private manner possible. It should never be fondled before company, or, in fact, touched at any time unless absolutely necessary. The nose, like all other organs, augments in size by frequent handling, so we recommend every person to keep his own fingers, as well as those of his friends, or enemies, away from it.

THE VALUE OF ETIQUETTE

It has long been my contention as a surveyor and historian of the social scene, that manners do change, usually for quite tenable reasons. When developing manners turn out to be "bad," they usually are modified because truly bad manners make people uncomfortable. Good manners, I am fond of saying, are the traffic rules of society. A psychiatrist once told me that those people who pretend that etiquette is not important, are really, in effect, saying, "I don't know anything about it. I'm not going to try. I might make a mistake."

The rules of etiquette give us something to lean on in a world that grows increasingly large and complex. In each generation, we find our way toward the rules that are the most comfortable and suitable for our time. Manners change, as they are changing now, some for the good, some for the bad. In the final analysis, the good and comfortable ones are being recorded for the guidance of future generations, along with a solid base of etiquette information, some of which is as inexplicable as it is familiar and comforting, thus necessary, too.