

Minding Our Manners

Egalitarianism's assault on class aims to make us all equally rude.

By Theodore Dalrymple

MY PARENTS HAD conflicting views about the nature and origin of good manners. My father took the Romantic view that they were the expression of man's natural goodness of heart and that they therefore emerged spontaneously—that is, if they emerged at all. If they didn't, it was because of the social injustice that inhibited or destroyed natural goodness. My mother took the classical view that good manners were a matter of discipline, training, and habit and that goodness of heart would, at least to an extent, follow in their wake. The older I grow, the more decisively I take my mother's side.

My father, who was left-wing in everything except his life, believed that manners in my mother's sense were but etiquette and that in turn etiquette was but a code by which the elite distinguished itself from *hoi polloi* in order to maintain its economic and cultural dominance. An elaborate code of conduct with arbitrary rules was a mask for sectional self-interest.

No doubt there is sometimes an element of truth in this. My mother taught me that when a gentleman accompanied a lady in the street—and he was to treat all women as ladies—he was always to walk on her outside, nearer the curb. There once was a time when this would have protected her from the splashes created by vehicles passing hurriedly by on muddy roads or perhaps even from the slops that householders emptied from their windows above. But this rationale had long since ceased to be the reason for a gentleman to walk on the outside of a lady.

My mother, however, instilled this principle so deeply in me that to this day I cannot walk on the inside of a lady—or, as we would call her now, a woman—without a feeling of unease very akin to guilt, as if I were doing something morally wrong. The fact is that most women nowadays have no idea why I change the side on which I accompany them when we cross the road, and some are even slightly disturbed by it, which, of course, obviates the whole purpose of good manners. I am thus left with an uncomfortable dilemma: either I must put up with an inner discomfort myself or risk causing my companion discomfort. It is clear which a true gentleman must choose.

It is obvious that, from the moral point of view, it matters not a bit on which side of the sidewalk a man accompanies a woman, unless she expresses a preference for one or the other. In this instance, my father would appear to have been right and to insist upon walking on the outer side of a woman would be not so much good manners as the self-conscious expression of superior caste.

A problem arises, however, when all such rules, arbitrary as some of them might be, are eroded to the point of total informality. The culture of any society becomes graceless in the absence of all formality, a development that is peculiarly evident in my own country, Great Britain. Here, gracelessness has become, by a peculiar ideological inversion that has occurred in my lifetime, a manifestation of political virtue. My

father's view of the whole matter of manners has triumphed all but completely.

The argument goes something like this: formality is etiquette, and etiquette is a manifestation of an unjust, class-ridden, patriarchal society. The rejection of etiquette and the formality it entails is therefore a sign that one is on the side of the angels, that is to say, of the egalitarians. Modern egalitarians, at least in Britain, do not content themselves with the kind of abstract or formal equality before the law that allows any amount of difference in wealth, status, taste, and sensibility; they demand some progress towards equalization of everything, including manners.

Of course, egalitarians are just as attached as everyone else to their own material possessions and wealth and have no real intention of forgoing them by radical redistribution, at any rate, of their own money and possessions. The struggle for equality—of the actual rather than the formal kind—has therefore to be transferred to fields in which it will cost the egalitarian nothing, or nothing material and financial.

What better way to prove your egalitarian credentials than by adopting the supposedly free and easy, utterly informal manners of those at the bottom of the social scale? The freer and easier the better, for such informality demonstrates another quality beloved of, and praised by, intellectuals: a superiority to the dictates of convention. Thus you can never be quite informal or unconventional enough.

In Britain, this has led in short order to the rejection of the most elementary of social rules. Young Britons now appear to think, for example, that the function of empty seats on trains is as a receptacle for their feet. (Why they should be the footweariest generation in history is a mystery, unless their behavior is considered as a deliberate challenge to convention.) A passenger who draws the attention of a young adult to the anti-social presence of his feet upon a seat will be met either by a torrent of abuse or, if the person doing it is better-educated, by moral self-justification. The last time I said anything about it, the young woman in question, by no means unpleasant, pointed out that her feet were clean, she having first removed her shoes, and that therefore she was within her rights. I was left searching for a Cartesian point from which to prove beyond all possible doubt that putting your feet up on seats in trains was wrong. It is a wearisome business trying to prove from first epistemological principles in every instance of minor public misconduct that it is morally wrong, especially when every failure to make the case is a justification for further such misconduct. It is strange how egalitarianism results in a rabid form of individualism, an angry individualism without worthwhile individuality.

Young women patients of mine who came from middle-class homes would routinely put their feet on the chair in which they were sitting in my consulting room. Patients chewed gum while speaking to me or ate snacks and drank soft drinks from cans (leaving them on the floor beside the chair when they had finished) as I inquired about their medical histories. A friend of mine, a doctor, told me how one of his patients had made her social arrangements for the evening on her cell phone while he was performing a gynecological examination on her.

This excess of informality is very undignified and unattractive and results in a society constantly on edge, even in the smallest of interactions. I think it explains in part the worldwide success of a series of books by my friend Alexander McCall Smith about a lady private detective in Botswana called *Mma Ramotswa*. For the African society that McCall Smith portrays so eloquently in these books is one in which a certain formality and ceremoniousness of manners still exists, which come as a great and instant relief to people who live in societies that are altogether without them. Not only do the ceremoniousness and formality help to smooth the rough edges of social interaction, but they allow some grading of such interaction, according to degrees of desired or

poor area of the East End of London, I found that there were old men and women who addressed and referred to their own spouses as Mr. Smith or Mrs. Jones, and never by their first names. They were ceremonious in other ways too. You could be sure that couples that addressed and referred to one another so formally had lived happily together for many years, on terms of the greatest mutual respect, and with the most intense affection, despite having often experienced the greatest hardship. Their manners were never rough.

In the British North and Midlands, I discovered also that there were many married couples of the same kind who referred to each other as Mother and Father (but never by the diminutives of

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achieved intimacy. Formality, moreover, is the precondition of subtlety and even of irony; without formality, life becomes coarse-grained and crude. The distinction between friendliness and friendship becomes blurred so that it is no longer even perceived.

In any case, it is only in the condescending imagination of egalitarian intellectuals that poor people, or people of low social class, are always rough-hewn and informal. There are few countries in the world poorer than Tanzania, yet when I lived there I was most struck by the exquisite, formal manners of the vast majority of Tanzanians, in shameful contrast to those of the much richer expatriates (including my own).

The idea that the manners of the working classes of industrialized societies were always informal and nothing else, and that there is something laudably democratic and egalitarian about informality, is mistaken. When, at the beginning of my career, I worked in a

these terms). The poverty that they had experienced, much worse than anything to be found today, was no barrier to the refinement of their speech and manner.

My father would no doubt have said that their innermost decency was the origin of their habitual good manners; my mother would have put it the other way round, that their innermost decency was the result of their habitual good manners. Without going quite so far as that, I think daily interactions are likely to be more pleasant in a society in which a degree of formality is required and admired than in one in which formality has been abandoned for ideological reasons. And, after all, small interactions are, within quite wide limits, what determine the quality of our lives. ■

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How to Handle Hamas

The Holy Land needs a more modest peace plan. Think Cyprus.

By Leon Hadar

GOOGLE “respected pollster” and “Palestinian” and you’ll get quite a few hits leading to Khalil Shikaki, who is described as “the most respected Palestinian pollster.” This view is shared by Tom Friedman and other journalists who regularly soundbite the findings of the head of the Ramallah-based Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research—whose institute has received funding from American foundations and who has served as an adviser to the U.S. government.

But according to Middle East expert Martin Kramer, there is one major problem in lending respectability to Shikaki as a pollster: his polls. Shikaki conducted three crucial polls that showed the moderate Fatah well ahead of militant Hamas by a comfortable and growing margin on the eve of the Palestinian parliamentary election. State Department officials were paying close attention to the results of these polls, which helped reinforce expectations that Fatah would win anyway and that Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas would be in a stronger position to discipline Hamas. “A lot of the certainty derived from Shikaki’s polls,” which according to Kramer, “have become a font of conventional wisdom.”

Shikaki, spinning his miserable performance, wrote in the Feb. 6 issue of *Newsweek International*, “a closer look at the numbers reveals a more complex picture,” noting that Hamas received only 45 percent of the popular vote, and that “the nature of the electoral system” magnified the fragmentation of Hamas’s opposition and gave the Islamist movement the 58 percent of the seats it won.

According to Shikaki’s numbers, the divided Fatah won a majority of the popular vote—55 percent—but only 39 percent of the seats. The “respected pollster” then went on to explain that Hamas’s remarkable showing “demonstrates that its supporters were more determined to vote than Fatah’s, and perhaps that some former Fatah supporters were lodging a protest vote.” And most important, “even Hamas’s own voters do not share its views on the peace process” with three quarters of all Palestinians, including more than 60 percent of Hamas voters, willing to support reconciliation between the Palestinians and Israel. “Had the issue of peace been the most important consideration in these elections, Fatah would certainly have won. But the peace process was the least important issue for the voters,” Shikaki concluded.

Shikaki should be reminded that his job was to uncover the “complex picture” before the election and that many of the problems that he mentioned as a way of defending his polling fiasco are the kind of issues considered by any experienced pollster. But more disturbing than his dog-ate-my-homework excuses is the fact that Shikaki’s spin on the Hamas victory has been embraced. Not unlike our old buddy Chalabi, who provided Washington with “information” that was instrumental in raising expectations about the outcome of the Iraq War, Shikaki seems to have become an expert in feeding American officials and pundits the kind of news that enables them to promote their preferred policies. In return, Mideast operators

like Chalabi and Shikaki win fame and fortune and help shape U.S. policy based on their respective agendas. Have a wishful thought? Democracy in Iraq or Palestine? Sunni-Shi’ite reconciliation in Mesopotamia? Peace in the Holy Land? Consider Chalabi & Shikaki your men in the Middle East.

Indeed, if Shikaki’s pre-election findings played a critical role in solidifying Washington’s policy (encourage Abbas to co-opt Hamas and create the conditions for reviving the peace process), his post-election spin (Hamas’s victory was not a landslide; Abbas’s allies won the popular vote; most Palestinians want peace) is feeding a fantasy: let’s isolate and weaken Hamas and deal with and strengthen Abbas and help ignite a backlash against the militant Islamists that will force them to support the peace process or cast them into the dustbin of history.

The Israeli government and some of its neoconservative allies agree on the need to isolate a Hamas-led PA by denying it the tax and customs receipts collected by Israel, arguing that such an economic embargo would force the Palestinians to sack Hamas and bring to power leaders who supposedly would be ready to bow to Israel’s dictates. The common assumption that drives these strategies—and that derives from Shikaki’s conclusions—is that the support among the Palestinians for Hamas is fragile and that outside pressure could create incentives for them to replace the Islamists with the “good guys.” Ironically, this is exactly the kind of policy that has been applied by Washington against the ayatollahs, which has only