

Considering Political Civility Historically: A Case Study of the United States

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This is a version of the paper that was delivered at the Annual Meeting of the International Society for Political Psychology, Amsterdam, 1999. I considered it a draft, but have never had time to revise it. I still intend to revise it, updated especially for context and for some more recent scholarship. Please, therefore treat it like a work in progress. Would appreciate suggestions.

Thank you.

Calls for civility have become a regular part of discussion and debate among journalists, public intellectuals, and scholars over the past decade or so in the United States. Public debate has involved representatives from different points on the political spectrum, such as Stephen L. Carter (1998), Kathleen Hall Jamieson (Jamieson and Falk 1998), Dinesh D'Souza (1995), and Gertrude Himmelfarb (1998). This preoccupation is also reflected in the publication of more scholarly – but widely discussed – related works, such as Steven Shapin's history of civility and the rise of modern science (Shapin 1994), the posthumous collection of Edward Shils' works on civility (Shils 1997), and Avishai Margalit's work on "the decent society" (Margalit 1996). Research and demonstration projects and centers have sprung up in many places devoted to restoring and encouraging civility in public life. Most of the public writing on civility frets over the existence of a civility crisis that threatens the functioning of a democratic society. Indications of this decline run a gamut of forms detectable in numerous places, including negative campaign advertising, cheap shots and harsh invective on the floor of Congress, obnoxious cross-examination procedures in courtrooms, uncivil interpersonal relations based on lingering racism, the breakdown of common purpose in the face of identity politics, disrespect for authority, the collapse of ethical principles and even common courtesy, saturation of the popular media with pornographic and obscene materials, the escalation of road rage, and even the oversaturation of society with cell phones.

It would seem we should all agree that civility has suffered a historical decline, that civility is good for politics, and therefore, from the point of view of the quality of democracy, the "civilitarian" movement¹ is a good bandwagon for scholars to join. Perhaps so. But if so, it is also worthy of more careful attention to detail, not just in terms of the normative arguments that have tended to preoccupy political theorists (Sinopoli 1995, Bickford 1996, Rorty 1997, Schmidt 1998), but also with respect to the more empirical assumptions that undergird these arguments. What, after all, is this civility that we have lost and must regain to protect democracy? Why and for what is it so crucial?

I will begin with an attempt to define civility and the civility crisis as these concepts seem to be used, paying special attention to some key empirical assumptions that underlie claims about the current state and significance of civility in politics. I will then examine two types of empirically-oriented literature that offer evidence about the sources and nature of civility: historical research, which throws light on variation in the cultural norms of civility, and sociolinguistics, social psychology, and pragmatics, which consider the properties of civility focusing on acts of communication in context. Having provided an analytic framework for the study of civility from these two different levels, I will examine aspects of U.S. political history to develop a further understanding of the significance of civility in the history of political action and communication.

Defining *Civility* and the Civility Crisis

¹A term introduced, as far as I know, by Randall Kennedy (1998).

Any scholarly treatment of civility and politics must start with the recognition that civility, while widely discussed and argued, does not really have full conceptual standing as a “keyword” in scholarship on democratic politics (Williams 1983). Even in scholarly discussion, civility rests on a much looser, less formalized (in any sense) set of meanings than, say, justice, democracy, or equality, which are the subjects of concerted efforts at definition and analysis, even if there is widespread disagreement over their meaning and application. It would take an advanced degree in alchemy, not political science, to draw a tidy but reasonably comprehensive definition out of the literatures to which one must turn to learn about civility as it is understood today. Nevertheless, in the context of the public and scholarly discussions of civility and democracy, the meanings cluster around the following cores, each of which has a long conceptual history.

First, as the Oxford English Dictionary enumerates, civility had to do with civil government, politics, citizenship, the city, and community in its earliest appearances. Civility was a quality appropriate to the good order of community and politics. It came to be associated with good character, but distinct from religious connotations. There is some residue of this broader meaning in current discussions, most notably, as a thread in the considerable contemporary political theory conversations about civil society and citizenship (Sinopoli 1995, Dagger 1997, Janoski 1998, Schmidt 1998). In these treatments, civility seems to encompass a broad range of the civic virtues. Indeed, reading widely in these current literatures, one senses that civility comes to merge considerably with the tradition of republican virtues on the one hand, and with the overlapping concern with social capital and communal and political involvement on the other. This is not the most common use of civility, however; thus for our purposes it is useful to keep the problem of civility analytically distinct from the broader questions of the character of citizenship and citizen involvement.

Second, civility was related historically to being civilized, cultured, and even, sometimes learned; in any case, not crude, primitive, and barbarous. Civility constituted the outward signs, the manners and demeanor, of being a civilized person. This is the sense explored most famously by Norbert Elias, in his two-volume work, The Civilizing Process: The History of Manners (1978) and Power and Civility (1982). Elias saw the foundation of this concept in the civilité of the courtly nobility; as he called it, the “vanguard of ‘civilization’.” Facing the increasing dangers of a more complex society structured around more multiple hubs of power, the nobility, Elias argued, was “gradually compelled to exercise a strict restraint of the affects and an exact moulding of conduct through its increasing integration in a network of interdependencies, represented here by the pincer formed of monarchy and bourgeoisie in which the nobility is trapped” (Elias, 1982, 256-57). The growth of the modern state, he demonstrated, was accompanied by an ever more detailed set of social practices on the part of an ever wider proportion of the population training them to engage in bodily and emotional self-regulation in order to help them engage in the more diverse interdependence marking the new socio-political world. Civility as self-regulated demeanor is very important to current debates; indeed, the sense of much of the literature is that we are sinking into a less civilized, more barbarous state.

Third, and very related to the second sense, civility historically revolved around the

behavior of individuals specifically in communication with each other, as the Oxford English Dictionary puts it, "Behaviour proper to the intercourse of civilized people; ordinary courtesy or politeness, as opposed to rudeness of behaviour; decent respect, consideration." This meaning lies at the core of the calls for civility. One major example is the work sponsored by the Kettering Foundation, which devotes many of its projects to understanding the potential for and encouraging "deliberative democracy." Consider the "Civic Declaration: Call for a New Citizenship," by the American Civic Forum, which opens with the following quotation from Martin Luther King: "In a neighborhood dispute there may be stunts, rough words, and even hot insults; but when a whole people speaks to its government, the dialogue and the action must be on a level reflecting the worth of that people and the responsibility of that government."² The self-description of the Johns Hopkins University Civility Project is another case in point; its "paramount goals are to assess the relevance of notions such as civility, manners, and politeness for American society today and to foster scholarly research on civility."³

The degree of civility, then, affects people's ability to engage in effective political communication and deliberation. It is part of the aspect of political communication that allows one to be able to listen (Bickford 1996) and communicate so as to preserve and enhance discussion rather than obstructing it. Civility, in this sense, is part of the p's and q's of politics: listening, turn-taking, displaying signs of courtesy and respect. Advocates of civility in politics do not deny that disagreement and confrontation is necessarily part of politics, but as the Co-Directors of the Conflict Research Consortium at the University of Colorado argue, civility requires "constructive" confrontation: "People need to recognize that other thoughtful and caring people have very different views on how best to address their community's many complex problems. Constructive debate needs to focus on solutions which are most likely to be successful, and not upon personal attacks leveled by adversaries against one another."⁴

The crisis in civility, then, is that civility has declined in such a way as to have unfortunate effects for the functioning of a democracy by making the members of society less fit for engaging in democratic politics, and less able to deliberate with each other democratically. But, as Randall Kennedy has said, "Talk about civility would prompt only boredom if it meant simply that it is better to be polite than to be rude" (Kennedy 1998). The issue is not simply about specific practices of civility, such as whether members of Congress call each other names, but about deeper disagreement over the very definition of civility. Those who see a civility crisis suggest that at the cultural level, we have lost a common core of principles by which we may be civil with each other. Democratic citizens are therefore engaging in the cacophonous noise of the builders at Babel rather than a mutually understood language of democratic deliberation.

²<http://www.journalism.wisc.edu/cpn/sections/new_citizenship/civic_declaration.html>

³<<http://www.civility.mse.jhu.edu/index.html>>

⁴Guy Burgess and Heidi Burgess. 1997. "The meaning of civility."
<<http://www.colorado.edu/conflict/civility.htm>>.

But speech or deliberation is not all; expressed anxieties over civility also turn on assumptions about the impact of these practices on the psychological states of the members of society. Conversation may well be harmed by a lack of civility, but more importantly, it diminishes people's psychological ability to be their own agents, even, to be fully human. It humiliates them (Margalit 1996), it makes them greedy and self-centered (Himmelfarb 1998), it denies people self-respect. These character effects are related to, but not the same as the direct effects on deliberation. They precede deliberation. As the most-often cited theorists of democratic deliberation, Hannah Arendt and Jürgen Habermas, have argued, democratic deliberation, as understood in its updated classic form, requires equal standing in the conversation and a capacity to engage in deliberation. So the character effects and conversational effects of civility are important, and bring us full circle to the two important aspects of the definition of civility discussed above: the ability of people to engage in self-regulation and (in both senses) self-government, and the ability of people to engage in collective deliberation, decision-making, and government.

As straightforward as this description of a civility crisis may seem, it is based on two broad empirical assumptions that have received less careful attention than is necessary. First is the historical assumption that civility has declined over time. Second are the social-psychological or behavioral assumptions that the level of civility has particular impacts on human character and behavior and, ultimately, on the way democratic institutions and processes operate. Let us look at these two sets of assumptions more closely.

Has civility in politics been on as clear a downward path as observers generally assume? If we use the indicators of common politeness, respect for authority, the prevalence of pornography and obscenity (not to mention road rage and cell phones), it would be hard to imagine disagreeing. But common modes of basic politeness have changed almost constantly throughout modern history, probably to the regret of most generations of parents watching their children choosing strange modes of conduct. Shifts in these practices are most certainly linked to larger issues of politics and state, but history shows that the relationship of these changes to political history is no simple or obvious matter (Elias 1978, Ariès and Duby 1987-1991, Kasson 1990). Considering the historical period since the rise of civility, surely there is no strong correlation between the display of civility and the quality of democratic deliberation exhibited in those same circles. What, then, has changed with respect to civility, and when, and in what relation to politics? These empirical questions require more attention before it is possible to develop detailed normative conclusions.

Discussion of the civility crisis is also threaded with social-psychological and socio-linguistic assumptions for which attention to research evidence would be useful. There are assumptions about what practices facilitate communication, political communication, and the practice of democracy; about how different types of human behavior are understood by others, and about the impact of different characteristics of communication. Social psychologists, linguists, and students of pragmatics have explored these kinds of question empirically, but this research is rarely referenced in the discussions of civility and its political significance. Thus, for example, participants in the civility debates embed often unstated propositions about

communication that strip the context of communication of any impact and imply an unwarranted universality to communication acts impacts. Even basic acts of courtesy and politeness vary across time and culture.

The remainder of this paper probes more deeply into research relevant to the historical questions of the amount of change we have witnessed in civility and its relation to politics and the functioning of democracy, and the social psychological questions of the potential political impact of civility. I will begin with a consideration of civility, not in its specifically political context or implications, but as a social phenomenon itself. The discussion will draw on both the historical and more contemporary-focused social science literatures. That will be followed with an investigation of illustrative cases of U.S. political history in which we can analyze the relationship of civility to politics, and especially to political action and the development of democracy. The point is to see what the lessons of actual historical and social-psychological and socio-linguistic research are for our current questions about civility.

Historical Studies of Civility

No scholar disputes Norbert Elias' research showing that the basic elements of civility and manners are historical, not natural phenomena. Ever since the English translation of the History of Manners (1978), his study of the fart, among others, has offered a pungent reminder that social mores, even those attending natural functions, are themselves historical phenomena, meaning not just that they change over time, but that these changes are subject to historical processes of social construction and reconstruction, affected by shifts in the conditions of human social and material life. Other research may quibble with his details concerning specific examples of civility practices, and some argues that he too sweepingly emphasized the rise of the modern state as a cause of the civilization of manners (Kasson 1990: 9ff), or that he left out important additional parts of the picture (Klein 1997), but there is general agreement that changes in civility were systematically fostered by shifts in social structure and the distribution of power and force. Ironically enough, those with a significant concentration of power and force – the nobility – were moved to soften their demeanor and especially, to develop self-control over their bodies and emotions.

Elias summarized this shift in an anecdote about two dukes in the court of Louis XIV, one a representative of the old order, the other of the new. "The former, one of the last knights, seeks to reach his goal by physical combat; the latter, the courtier, by conversation. The former acts from impulse with little thought of others; the latter perpetually adjusts his behaviour to his interlocutor" (Elias 1982: 281). It is not simply that patterns of conduct change, but that the psychological mechanisms that underlie the conduct become deeply ingrained, therefore automatic or semi-automatic. As a further result, cultural patterns of expectation and interpretation of other people's behavior are modified, strengthened and naturalized. Thus changes in civility were intertwined at the psychological, behavioral, and cultural levels, and both flowed from and had an impact on politics. Of course, this change from knight to courtier was

not based on a preference for democracy or democratic deliberation, but for safety.⁵ Moreover, the changes did not occur evenly across society as a general cultural change. Nor, by implication, did they simply spread around society by some mechanism of diffusion of innovation or imitation. Rather, they were governed by social structure and condition.

There are many other chapters to the historical development of civility. In order to lay the groundwork for investigating the relationship between civility and modern politics, following its path outward from the court in terms of both changes in the class basis of civil demeanor and the location of civility is crucial. Lawrence Klein, for example, uses a case study of the rise of the English coffeehouse to trace a transformation from civility to politeness (note this is the historical period in which the concepts of civility and politeness came to be distinguished in the minds of certain intellectuals), and from a courtly base to a more middle-class one. The coffeehouse, which offered both hot beverages and a lot of reading material, was regarded in the late 17th century as a place that might be politically dangerous because it was frequented by men who were not of the courtly class or particularly learned, but was “an unsupervised distribution point for news, whether transmitted in oral or printed form” that would engender “unreflective” and possibly dangerous discussion (Klein 1997: 32). They were, indeed, places where Whiggish political organization occurred. By the early 18th century, however, coffee houses were widely seen as sites fostering “politeness” (contrasted favorably with more courtly civility), in which the arts of polite conversation could be developed by (Whig) gentlemen outside the supervision of royal courts.

Many other historians have traced some of the continuing shifts in the mores of self-control and interaction that marked the rise of a bourgeois culture that paid increasing attention to the rituals of day-to-day activity and interaction (Davidoff and Hall 1987). Within the context of English culture, an important focus of the shifts in manners and mores emanated from the middle class, especially religious Dissenting groups, who were also intent on democratizing politics. But interestingly, for our concern with civility, the intellectual proponents of these changes often contrasted “manners” and “morals;” for them, manners had to do with the complicated and false outward demeanor of courtiers, while morals had to do with simpler representation of (sometimes republican) virtue.⁶ This is one of many instances in which modern complex class societies contain within them competing models of civility, related in often subtle ways to the politics of the time.

One of the most important and relevant works on the phenomenon of civility is John Kasson’s (1990) book, Rudeness and Civility, focusing on the history of manners in 19th century

⁵It is at this stage of his argument that he also explicitly develops his case for “a science that does not yet exist, historical psychology” (Elias 1982: 282). I will discuss this further as part of the methodological and theoretical underpinnings of the larger project of which this is a part, although Elias depended much more for his psychological theory on psychoanalysis than I will.

⁶For more discussion, see Sapiro 1992:218-19.

urban America. Following in the footsteps of Norbert Elias, but using different methods and approaches, Kasson launches an empirically-based head-on challenge to the notions that the practices of civility are ageless, that the United States has witnessed a general decline in civility over the long haul, and that civility is an unmitigated good for democracy. Like Elias, Kasson sees civility as tied both to historically-shaped larger social formations on the one hand, and the inner working of human relations and personality on the other. Also like Elias, Kasson emphasized the growth of an increasingly detailed code of conduct revolving around self-control and restraint of the body and emotions, although in this case the time frame is the 19th century and the place is urbanizing America.

Kasson concludes, however, that while civility as it developed is an “indispensable prerequisite to a democratic society and to everyday social intercourse,” it also functions as a check against a democratic order, “and in support of special interests, institutions of privilege, and structures of domination” (Kasson 1990:3). This dual impact is owing to at least two different aspects of civility. First, it is linked to social classifications and boundaries, helping to define social relationships and the “place” of different individuals and groups within those relationships. Kasson notes that the authors of the vast 19th century literature on etiquette were attacked by “those with aristocratic pretensions,” who found American society and the American “democratic” version of civility vulgar “and viewed republicanism as incompatible with refinement” and, simultaneously, “by democratic critics who heard within hymns to civility the less noble strains of snobbery and class interests” (Kasson 1990:58). He quotes one guidebook to American mores as noting that “Rudeness and Republicanism” were “synonymous terms”(Kasson 1990: 59). The ambivalence even American etiquette writers could feel about the relationships among equality, democracy, and civility is evident in this observation by an etiquette writer of the 1880s: “We are all forced, in spite of individual objections and protests, to put into practice the national theory of equality. We must mix together, and it therefore behooves us, for our own comfort, to make the mixture as smooth and agreeable as possible” (quoted in Kasson 1990: 60).

The rules of civility never applied to all social groups in the same way. What constituted civil, modest, respectful, self-controlled, appropriate behavior and modes of interaction depended very heavily on one’s class, gender, race, ethnicity, age, and a host of other positional markers. In the 19th century rudeness “constituted a kind of social obscenity, a violation of the codes of civility in such a way as to make public that which should remain private, to single out for special attention that which should remain inconspicuous, or else to cast public actions, conduct, and individual actors in an unworthy or degrading light” (Kasson 1990:115). At the time it was certainly difficult for women or black people, for example, to do much in public that would not make them conspicuous, and therefore put them in violation of codes of civility.

But the reinforcement of social hierarchy was not the only negative side of civility that Kasson found in his historical research. Civility is, after all, about self-governance, which can privatize and individualize social problems stemming from social and institutional causes. As Kasson wrote,

Thus apostles of civility battled for far bigger stakes than how best to eat asparagus. Their

enterprise must be viewed with the larger concern of how to establish order and authority in a restless, highly mobile, rapidly urbanizing and industrializing democracy. Seeking to avoid overt conflict, they turned issues of class and social grievance back upon the individual. They redefined issues of social conflict to questions of personal governance, social propriety, and 'good taste.' The rules of etiquette would extend the laws and teach each individual his social duties (1990:62).

The rules of civility meant not making an unnecessary issue of things. But, in politics, who is to judge what constitutes making a fuss?

Civility Studies in Pragmatics

Contemporary social-science research on civility practices and perceptions find systematic evidence that what constitutes civility is culturally constructed, contextually driven, and depends on the social standing and placement of those involved. Although to the untrained eye the rules of civility may seem simple -- say "please" and "thank you," use words, not hands -- they are in fact constituted by a very subtle and nuanced web of context-sensitive contingent rules of verbal and nonverbal behavior.

Linguistic civility is very context specific. Politeness might be understood as 'politic' behavior, i.e. socially sanctioned norms of interaction, with polite behavior serving the explicit function of ensuring comity, social harmony, and counterbalancing potential conflict. Rudeness, by contrast, is constituted by deviation from whatever counts as politic in a given social context, is inherently confrontational and disruptive to social equilibrium. Politic behavior normally goes unnoticed, rudeness is conspicuous and in most ordinary conversation calls for redress... (Kasper 1990:208).

Linguists distinguish between "relative" and "absolute" politeness. In the latter case an act is polite or rude regardless of context; in the former, the much larger category by far, an act's politeness or rudeness is contingent on context (Culpeper 1996).

Another distinction with interesting implications for civility in politics is the linguistic distinction between "reactive" or "licensed" rudeness. If an act of perceived rudeness (for example, showing too little emotional restraint or engaging in other behavior perceived as socially inappropriate) appears to the observer to be "self-initiated," that is, unjustified, the observer is ultimately licensed to retaliate, or behave in what would otherwise be considered a rude manner.⁷ One who behaves rudely, according the politeness rules of the road, "forfeits claims to public protection in the form of considerateness otherwise conveyed to social members" (Kasper 1990:209). This is why those who are not very competent in a particular language and culture "suffer the perennial risk of inadvertently violating politeness norms, thereby forfeiting their claims to being treated as social equals" (Kasper 1990: 193).

Perceived degrees of civility depend on people's status and social situation and their

⁷The classic cited example is the exasperated bus-rider who exclaims to the fellow traveller with the full-blast radio: "Turn that damned radio off!" (Kasper 1990:209)

relationship to others. Communication patterns, including those relevant to marking civility, vary according to status and cultural groupings such as age, race, gender, ethnicity, class, and occupation, and they depend on whether one is communicating with a member of one's "in-group" or not. It is important to underscore that the variation is structured by both culture, or the larger framework for language, and status, the relative ranking of people within a society.⁸ People with different status levels can be perceived to be employing different levels of civility by engaging in identical acts; those with higher status have more license to interrupt others or invade their personal space, control eye contact, use informal means of address, ask questions, change topics, use space expansively, make noise, and so forth. Indeed, impoliteness is especially likely to emerge in situations of differential power because of this difference in license (Culpeper 1996: 354).⁹ Moreover, people are especially likely to remember the degree of politeness projected by people when that degree was incongruent with their status; that is, when a high status person is especially polite to a low-status person, or a low-status person is impolite to a high-status person (Holtgraves 1997). Ironically, a lack of conventional civility is also very likely to appear among intimates. Mock impoliteness, such as banter and "affectionate insults" may actually help foster or signal solidary ties and closeness among intimates (Culpeper 1996:354-55; see also Kasper 1990: 201-202; Miller 1991). If an "outsider" were to imitate these same behaviors, they would be taken as rude or worse.¹⁰

Cultural differences in civility patterns are also important for providing a framework for understanding politics and civility, especially in cases of inter-cultural contact and communication within multi-ethnic, multicultural societies. Linguists find considerable variety in the particular markers of politeness within different languages and societies. In some, to be polite under certain circumstances requires being direct where elsewhere one should be indirect. Here, one should not talk about money with strangers, while there, one should not discuss religion. Toleration for interruption and simultaneous talking varies, as does how much one should mitigate an imperative ("Would you mind terribly much closing the window?"), exhibit formality or deference, or focus on negative face (displaying an effort not to impede someone else's wants) or positive face (displaying an effort to facilitate those wants) (Brown and Levinson 1978).

⁸In real life, the simultaneous, but different impact of status and culture, for example, due to being part of a particular ethnic group, likely creates special issues for communication and civility.

⁹There is actually an interesting definitional issue here. Linguists agree there are circumstances in which certain people have more "license" to be impolite, but because they also agree that politeness is contextually defined, we should probably not say they are more likely to be impolite, but that they have more license to engage in acts that would be considered impolite if done by, for example, their social inferiors. We can use the inverse formulation for analyzing the communication patterns among those with less status.

¹⁰Thus Jews tell each other "Jewish" jokes that play on stereotypes of Jews, and African Americans call each other "nigger," but no amount of friendship and intimacy is likely to give a non-Jew or a non-African American license to join in the ribbing.

Because of the contextual effects and cultural differences, “politeness can only be judged relative to a particular context and a particular addressee’s expectations and concomitant interpretation” (Meier 1995: 387). For this reason, A.J. Meier, among others, has concluded, “Politeness can be said to be universal only in the sense that every society has some sort of norms for appropriate behavior, although these norms will vary” (Meier 1995: 388). One society, culture, sub-culture or social group cannot be said to be more polite or rude than another (or, certainly, inherently polite or rude) unless one is specifically justified in using a common measure across those culture groups. “The folk notion of one culture being ‘more or less polite’ than another can be ascribed to one language using linguistic forms, for example, that are associated with a different meaning in a comparable context in another speech community” (Meier 1995:388; see also Kasper 1990). Some linguists therefore prefer to talk about “appropriateness” or “politic” communication, which emphasizes this contextual relativity. A problem for understanding civility in politics is that politeness is generally so thoroughly inculcated through socialization that its norms are naturalized; for most people who do not read journals of pragmatics, the norms of civility appear to have common denominators.

Thus, the norms and practice of civility may have a much more fluid and negotiated character than most people realize. Bruce Fraser proposes a “conversational contract” theory of politeness, that “upon entering into a given conversation, each party brings an understanding of some initial set of rights and obligations that will determine, at least for the preliminary stages, what the participants can expect from the other(s)” (Fraser 1990:232). These terms and conditions may derive from three broad sources. The first is convention, which may be summed up as the types of norms discussed above: rules of civility that stem from culture, but are further constrained by the norms attendant to status, subgroup, and relative standing. What factors influence the use and perception of politeness varies, as we might expect, cross-culturally (Ambady, Koo, and Lee 1996; Nishida, Hammer, and Wiseman 1998).

Second, terms and conditions of communication may be imposed by the specific institutions in which communication takes place. Most social institutions -- churches, legislatures, courts, theaters, classrooms -- have well-known formal and informal norms of communication. These are also culturally variable. One cannot talk about appropriate behavior “in church;” compare the norms of a traditional Lutheran church, a Black Baptist Church, and an Orthodox synagogue. For an example closer to politics, despite the worries of the Annenberg reports on civility in Congress, the conventional differences in communication norms between the British Parliament (“Order! Order!”) and the U.S. Congress suggest that the ruffians are to be found in the Mother Country, not the frontier. These norms are historically created, often as a result of successive changes in rules, as in the case of legislatures and courts. Sometimes the changes have been urged through reeducation efforts; John Kasson offers an interesting history of the mid-19th century efforts on the part of theaters and music societies to make audiences learn to be silent and attentive during high culture performances. Earlier, house lights remained on during performances, and audience members engaged in constant conversation (Kasson 1990: Chapter 7). Within ongoing institutions, participants ultimately renegotiate the terms of communication, including what constitutes civility.

Finally, Fraser says that terms and conditions of communication are imposed by previous encounters, or the specific history of the relationship among those interacting. Despite general or institutional norms, people develop patterns of expectation and reaction over time. Knowledge that actual interaction can overcome general norms underlies strategies intended to get people to dispense with their stereotypes about other social groups by actually working with their members. The films produced by the first National Issues Convention at the University of Texas were filled with participants remarking about how much difference it made to sit with and talk to people from social groups they had not encountered directly before.¹¹ There is also, however, another possible impact of direct encounters, when people find out first-hand how different are the structures of day-to-day life, including its civility practices, and find themselves made uncomfortable or even angry or contemptuous. This reaction is common among travelers who stay abroad long enough for the first excitement to wear off, but too briefly to become integrated into the new culture. Historian Drew Gilpin Faust reported that this latter reaction was common among women refugees of the Confederate South who, in residing temporarily with households in other parts of the South after their own had been invaded by Union troops, often found themselves irritated rather than grateful because of the subregional or class differences in daily life practices (Faust 1996:40-45). In any case, people learn from their specific encounters and readjust their patterns of interaction both to expectations derived from past encounters and, as game theorists have shown, to their assumptions about how much future interaction they will have (Ostrom 1998).

Thus, evidence from historical and contemporary social-science research on civility suggests that the phenomenon is more complicated and, frankly, potentially more interesting for its implications for democratic politics than much of the vast current public discussion suggests. These very diverse types of scholars, using different tools and levels of analysis suggest the following. Civility is indeed not “ageless.” Civility is not simply a matter of saying “please” and “thank you” or “eating asparagus properly.” Its rules shift over time, they vary across different cultural and status groups, and they are both contingent on and contain contingencies for the particular status and relationship of those involved in the communication, its setting, and its various purposes. Civility in practice generally requires that different people act differently from each other to be regarded as equally civil, but for some members of society, it is actually harder to appear civil in certain circumstances. Civility facilitates communication, but it can also choke it off, especially among those who are of relatively low status or those whose communication might call particular attention to themselves or their needs, or might be considered in appropriate by other people. Rules of civility are so ingrained as part of the way people are socialized into their societies and cultures, however, that they do not tend to be aware of the rules except in the breach but feel very uncomfortable – and negatively toward the perpetrator – when they are violated. Civility is linked to politics in two senses; its rules are linked to the structure and process of power relations within society, and the norms and practices of society change in relation to larger political changes.

¹¹Although it is not clear from the NIC poll what impact this actually had on their views.

All of these observations make less sense of the simple statement that “more civility in politics would be a good thing.” Rather, civility bears a double edged relation to politics, and as a central mechanism of social life, should offer an interesting analytical handle for understanding important aspects of the history of political action and political communication. We therefore turn to some examples of how we might understand civility and its role in the context of U.S. political history.

Civility in U.S. Political History

The histories of civility and politeness show that it is a gross oversimplification to imagine a past marked by what is identified in intellectual circles as civility, with a progressive decline until recently. Even the version of the story that often seems conventional, that people were general civil in social life and politics until the 1960s, when it all took a downward turn, is inadequate. We have picked up the thread of the history of civility by civility and politeness itself, as in the focus of Kasson’s history. Let us now pick up the story by the thread of politics and political activity, to consider some key passages in the history of political action and communication in order to detect the place of civility in those stories. Taking a broader view of scholarly research on political history offers a different picture of civility from that offered by the civilitarians. This may be because those concerned with civility tend to focus narrowly on organizational activities of the sort also emphasized in current debates about “civic renewal,” the “new citizenship” and “social capital.”¹² But the history of democratic political action is not limited to these efforts, and it is worth investigating a wider range to see the role of civility in them.

At the most basic levels, mass political action in the eventual major democracies of Western Europe and North America from the 17th century to the middle of the 19th was fractious, noisy, rude, obnoxious, and often physically dangerous. It is no wonder so many elites were worried about mobocracy if “the people” were to gain more power; the constant thread of “revel, riot, and rebellion” in popular politics, as one influential historian put it (Underdown 1985) is overwhelming given how this history is passed over in most citizens’ basic education about their political history. There were numerous riots and insurrections up until the well-known Civil War draft riots. In some parts of the country, especially the South and the backcountry, not only was violence especially common, but, as shall be discussed below, it was regarded as an important part of the moral economy of honor, family, and property (Brown 1977, Fischer 1989, Wyatt-Brown 1986, MacLean 1994).

Mary Ryan’s research on 19th century U.S. political history claims that looking carefully into the 1830s and 1840s “rode roughshod over any refined notion of political protocol or decorum;” it was an era of mobs and riots and disorderly expressions of public opinion “higher than at any other time in American urban history” (Ryan 1997: 129). She argues that people took

¹²For good examples, see the Civic Practices Network (<http://www.cpn.org>), which includes in its website many essays by associated activists, intellectuals, and scholars.

mob action “in stride” because it was part of the temper and mores of the time. While one might wonder how widely true it was that “a mayor could take a blow to the face without taking undue offense” (Ryan 1997, 140), her research and that of other political historians suggests that “An indelicate balance between civility and belligerence may, in the last analysis, be a previous contribution of the nineteenth-century city to American democracy” (Ryan 1997: 18). Once again, however, it also suggests that the very definition of civility as it applied to politics underwent fundamental changes. Robert Wiebe underscores this point in his comments on the history of electoral practices in the United States: “The short funereal lines outside a modern voting booth would have alarmed a 19th century democrat at least as much as the thought of the 19th century’s boisterous, partisan crowds seems to distress commentators today.” In understanding that the underlying standards of civility are variable, Wiebe notes that, “Harsh language has often communicated how much politics matters” (Wiebe 1995: 7).

Even leaving aside the uncivil period of the slave system and Civil War, the period from the 1880s to the 1920s was also marked by demanding voices, contentious actions, and violence. In the same era in which Edith Wharton learned to chafe from the increasing pressures of private norms of civility, politics was marked by the rise of contentious organizing among urban workers, farmers, women’s rights advocates, African Americans, white racists and other xenophones, socialists, and a host of others. In the 1920s conventional politics, represented by national nominating conventions, were hardly good representatives of what we might call civility.

Surveying the history of mass political action in the course of democratization of the long consolidated democracies does not lead one to the conclusion that civility was the main norm that held democratization on course. Probably the richest vein of political history that focuses seriously on mass politics revolves around the theories and evidence of contentious politics advanced most effectively by Charles Tilly (1979, 1995). Tilly defines contention in mass politics by focusing on claims-making activities, saying that, “When the claims in question would, if realized, affect the interests of other actors, we may speak of contention” (Tilly 1995: 43). This body of work is especially useful for our purposes because it historicizes political action itself, considering the changes in the concentration and forms of political action that constituted political contention in different times and places, and the causes of those changes and formulations. Tilly’s and others’ research emphasizes the idea of repertoires of contention, that is, “a limited set of routines that are learned, shared, and acted out through a relatively deliberate process of choice.” These are “learned cultural creations,” derived from experience rather than abstract philosophy (Tilly 1995: 41). These varied according to group, status, and context; they are “Forms of action bear all the marks of particular cultures, everyday local life, accumulated traditions, and specific interests.” But also changes “that record the great transformations of interests and social organization in the world at large” (Tilly 1977:49).

People engaging in contentious acts have usually violated norms of civility in their opponents’ eyes. Contentious acts are not the first choice response for those who engage in them; contentious acts occur when people are not allowed the means to engage in political performances with more civility (for example, they can’t vote or they and their representatives

are not allowed to appear or speak where decisions are made) or where more “politic” acts are systematically rebuffed. But, as we have seen, actions do not have to be as patently obnoxious as tarring and feathering, throwing rocks, or marching loudly through the streets to be regarded as lacking in civility. Acts as simple and normal in the abstract as sitting near the front of the bus, attempting to walk into one’s neighborhood school, or teaching someone to read can also be regarded as highly contentious and uncivil under the right circumstances. The fascinating turns of history in which the meanings of actions and words change over time and across perspective mean that some of the crucial sites of struggle over the definition and process of democratic politics happen when apparently uncivil acts – violence itself – can be regarded as civil, and apparently civil acts – ordinary things such as walking, eating, speaking – can be regarded as outrages.

Avoiding violence in politics is not always the accepted thing to do. There are times when, far from displaying civility, avoiding violence is widely regarded as an act regardless of the community, even treasonous. If there is a war on, a man [sic] is supposed to participate. Americans learn that there came a time in which, while continuing to negotiate might have been a good thing, taking up arms in colonial rebellion in the 1770s was right. The rebellions, vendettas, and rebellions of the back country, and the moral ideology of the Ku Klux Klan (and later racist movements) both reveal complicated sets of norms justifying violence in terms of something akin to civility.

Many historians have explored the meanings and uses of violence in the South and backcountry. In David Hacker Fischer’s cultural history of the migrations from the different regions of England to the different colonial regions of America, he underscored the role of violence in the societies of both the 17th century migrants from the South of England to what became the Southeast of the United States, and that of the 18th century migrants from the Welsh, Irish, and Scottish borderlands to the inland “back country” of the American colonies. In both cases violence was a more tolerated, even respected feature of social life than it was in the subcultures of the other regions. Fischer, like other historians, emphasizes the relationship between violence and honor in early Southern culture, in which honor had to do with physical courage and tenacity of will but in a context of virtue, gentility, and good breeding (Fischer 1989: 296-97). Liberty was a paramount value, and part of the proof of one’s liberty was the ability to have dominion over others. Violence was in general more tolerated in the South (as Fischer’s comparisons of the characteristics of sport demonstrate), but the right to defend one’s honor and liberty with violence was also distributed hierarchically. A man who would not defend his liberty and honor had neither. The Southern codes regarding violence in dealing with preserving the social order were seen as part of, not contradictory to the extraordinary emphasis on codes of conduct that included great attention to courtesy – to all who deserved it.

In the back country honor was also crucial, including the honor of the clan, but there was much less trust in either governmental and religious authorities (which, of course, had a much more tenuous hold in both the borderlands of England and the back country of America) or in any clearly organized social order. The law of retribution and vendetta was the paramount means for defending oneself, one’s family, and one’s honor. The back country was the site of the original

Lynch's law (Fischer 1989: 767). The "homestead ethic," an important part of which revolved around the rights to occupy and enjoy a piece of property unencumbered by threats to person or property, led to this tradition of defense of family, property and honor through violence to result in no less than nine violent rebellions in the last half of the 18th century, including the famous Whiskey and Shays rebellions, as well as the insurrections of the green Mountain Boys, the Paxton Boys, the North Carolina Regulators, and others (Brown 1977). Here, too, in an important sense, the localized notion of civility, tied up with honor, sanctioned violence (constrained by the prevailing social norms) rather than defining it as an exception to civility.

Research on the second Ku Klux Klan¹³ offers a very interesting example of how alternative definitions of civility play out in anti-democratic politics (Blee 1991, Maclean 1994). As Nancy Maclean has argued, understanding the Klan means surrendering "some comforting illusions" that make them completely alien to normal citizenship. "Not only did the Klan draw from the broad middle of the nation's class structure, but it most commonly mobilized support through campaigns waged on the prosaic theme of upholding community moral standards" (Maclean 1994: xii). The vast proportion of the second Klan and their wives were church-going, civic-minded people who deeply feared the collapse of the old norms of civility, decency, and community. They drew strongly from republican norms "about who had the right to participate in politics and about what ends it should promote" (Maclean 1994:79-80). They were disgusted by the incursions into decency: race mixing, women who turned their backs on feminine propriety; men who abused their wives; Catholics who believed in the hierarchical, quasi-monarchy of papism rather than the more egalitarian, republican values; communists who "condensed into a single entity all the leveling influences Klansmen perceived in the contemporary world" (Maclean 1994: 81-82). They could see all around them not just these signs of degeneration of a decent society and republican polity, but also the signs of gathering political power on the part of the forces of evil: black people were being more resistant, economically ambitious, and politically organized (and many, who were veterans of World War I, were actually armed); women had organized politically;¹⁴ labor unions and the socialists were on the rise.

The men of the Klan organized to restore decency. Their organization was formed explicitly along the model of other fraternal brotherhoods. They sought to strengthen their economic communities, they emphasized the importance of unselfishness both in their words and through their acts when they donned robes to do charity work among poor white widows and children, and they punished both black and white transgressors with violence, although the vast proportion of executions through lynching or other means were saved for black men. They could not depend on distant governments to help them; as populists they did not trust elites. Like Patrick Henry and Thomas Jefferson, they believed that because "their government was of, by,

¹³This is not to suggest that the KKK was limited to the South or the back country, although those were their strong holds.

¹⁴Although much of the Klan was in favor of women suffrage because of the support they new they would gain from the votes of the white women in their communities.

and for the people, citizens were entitled to act in its stead when they represented the popular will,” especially if the government ignored the will of the people (Maclean 1994: 159). They followed the traditional norms of honor in their dealings with others; they creed said that a Klansman should be “a MAN who values HONOR more than life” (MacLean 1994:162). “To seek redress from the state was to concede the loss of honor and accept public shame” (Maclean 1993:163).

In most parts of the country for much of U.S. history, women could violate the norms of civility simply by appearing in public places or certainly, by attempting to engage in politics at all. There simply was no way for women to advance their interests through politics in a civil manner. As many students of women’s political history have pointed out, politics is a public activity and a woman in public was not where a decent woman should be. Mary Ryan (1992) opens her influential book, Women in Public, with a signal anecdote in the form of a general order issued by the commander of the Union forces in New Orleans:

As the officers and soldiers of the United States have been subject to repeated insults from the women (calling themselves ladies) of New Orleans, in return for the most scrupulous non-interference and courtesy on our part, it is ordered that hereafter when any female shall, by word, gesture, or movement, insult or show contempt for any officer or soldier of the United States, she shall be regarded and held liable to be treated as a woman of the town plying her vocation (Ryan 1992: 3).

Women literally couldn’t enter many of the spaces in which politics and political discussion occurred. When the famous reformer, Fanny Wright, was invited to speak in Tammany Hall in 1836, she was interrupted by hissing, stink bombs, vulgarity, and shouts of “whore” and “harlot” (Ryan 1992: 134). Women abolitionists meeting in the pro-abolition areas of New York and Boston were rebuked in the press and in pastoral letters taunted with sexual innuendos (Ryan 1992: 134).

Although many historians have uncovered the various ways in which women of all social groups engaged in politics, there was little possibility that women could press for their own sense of their interests – whatever they were – through the means of politics because, beside lacking basic civil and political rights, they could not display themselves in public on their own behalf or speak of politics to men without violating norms of civility and decency. The advice of a 19th century etiquette book for women left little political potential for women: “The best way to overcome the selfishness and rudeness you sometimes meet with in public occasions is by great politeness and disinterestedness. ... Contending for your rights stirs up the selfish feelings of others; but a readiness to yield them awakes generous sentiments” (quoted in Kasson 1990:160-61). If it was uncivil to call attention to oneself, or make others uncomfortable, women – who had to abide by stricter standards of modesty and self-abnegation – had precious few options for speaking of their interests.

The whiplash of multiple norms of civility have occasioned important debates over political tactics in many political organizations and movements. Women’s movements, black

rights movements, and the gay movement,¹⁵ among others, have faced important decision points when they have tried to take account of both the high bar for civility that was applied to them and their frustrations with attempting to achieve even basic political consideration while being excluded from the centers of power. Should they attempt to press for their rights within a framework that fit as closely as possible to contemporary standards of civility? This would require great displays of deference on the part of activist women and African Americans, working primarily through white male agents, allowing their agendas to be governed by the priorities and understandings of predominantly white male organizations, and counseling each other great and constant patience. Some rights organizations counseled their constituencies to do just this on the grounds that the justice of their arguments would become clear if they could stay within the bounds of politic speech and demeanor codes. Others, such as Alice Paul's more radical women's suffrage organizations, argued that these codes were stacked against those without rights, and only more direct – and uncivil – methods would accomplish change. How could gay rights movement act in a way that would fall within the bounds of civility to those who define homosexuality as essentially wrong and objectionable?

Civility and Democratic Politics in the United States

The relationship of civility to the history of democratic politics offers a complicated, interesting, and ultimately very important story. Once we abandon the naive idea that civility is defined by any simple set of rules that can be applied effectively across the board, it becomes an analytically useful handle for investigating the history of political action, and its relationship to more general social relationships and mores. An important train of thought in political theory and history urges on us the importance historicizing key political concepts, and abandoning the notion that there is an essential, timeless core to them (Hanson 1985; Ball, Farr, and Hanson 1989). This does not imply that meanings of these concepts are sand paintings that will blow away as we move close to analyze them, but rather, that they are created and recreated through some of the very political processes and problems the concepts are intended to describe. Civility is one of these terms.

The norms of civility are not ageless, they cannot be applied willy-nilly across time, place, and situation, and they are not an unmitigated good for democracy. But understanding the double-edged, complicated nature of civility from a historical and psychological point of view offers no reason to suggest that the struggle to reach understanding, a common vocabulary, a means to engage in respectful, democratic deliberation and all those other things the “civilitarians” seek is anything but a fine political goal. Civility is a useful and important analytical concept, and the practices associated with it are key elements of political culture, action, and communication, for a number of reasons.¹⁶ From an analytical point of view, systematic examination of civility can help us learn more about the nature of political action in

¹⁵Thanks to John Brehm for reminding me of the latter, especially in the debates about ACT-UP.

¹⁶Thanks to John Brehm and Joe Soss for their comments that helped my thinking here.

context. Civility offers a handle for understanding some of the limits and opportunities of political action and communication under different circumstances, depending, for example, on how homogeneous or diverse is the political community under investigation, how hierarchical its social structure, what particular social groups we are investigating, what are their institutional contexts, and their continuing patterns of interaction. We have much to learn, also, by understanding how particular political communities and institutions deal with infractions of generalized norms of civility, and how -- if at all -- they go about promoting civility. From a practical point of view, as we have seen, social movements and organizations have often contended with how to position their activity in relation to norms of civility. Indeed, it is likely a daily occurrence that people active in politics make much the same calculation under certain circumstances. In some cases (as early anarchist theory posited,¹⁷ and a number of later political action groups such as welfare rights organizations put into practice), choosing to act in an uncivil manner can be designed to reveal and highlight the norms of the larger society or its political institutions which might otherwise be obscured as long as those in power are basically getting their way. Finally, of course, as the vast majority of writers on civility have commented, civility is indispensable for helping conversations about politics move forward.

But “civility” is not easy to achieve, not because people get hot-tempered in politics (which they do) or because they haven’t learned all the rules “properly” (which they haven’t). Civility is, in fact, difficult to achieve in any setting in which people have differences of status, history, culture, or interests. In other words, civility is difficult to achieve when we most need political deliberation. Civility is itself something that needs to be sought, deliberated, and negotiated. The call for “civility” is often reminiscent of calls for “management” rather than “politics”: a method of decision-making that can transcend clashes of interests and those other aspects of decision-making that give politics a dirty name, even among those who prize it as the means for a people to achieve a sustainable and just collective existence. Achieving civility, for better or worse, requires engaging in political process of deliberation. Unfortunately, in real life, there is no meta-language for politics. Civility is of politics; not above it.

¹⁷See Emma Goldman’s (1970) autobiography, Living My Life, in which she discussed anarchist views of violence.

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