

**MOULDING URBAN IDENTITIES AROUND 1900.  
NEW YORK CITY CONDUCT MANUALS**

*Modelarea identităților urbane în jurul anului 1900. Codul bunelor maniere newyorkeze*

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*Abstract: The essay expands upon the interdependence between conduct manuals (basically addressed to the middle class) and the development of urban, middle class identities. This thesis is illustrated by a survey of a few essential conduct manuals which came out in New York City in the latter half of the nineteenth century. They contributed to moulding a typically American, middle class identity.*

*Keywords: conduct manuals, urban development, identity, progress, politeness*

*Introduction*

In the latter half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, cities everywhere were re-created. Streets were paved and bordered by sidewalks, public transportation was introduced, running water and sewers became a (wished for) reality, the telephone was invented, so was electric lighting, etc. While reshaping the cities' infrastructure, all these facilities triggered – new, modern, lifestyles, and framed a new, modern kind of middle class.

To give only the most obvious examples in this respect, the appearance of sidewalks and of public transportation were an indirect sign of consideration for the middle class (clerks, petty businessmen, merchants, school teachers, etc.) who were either walking or taking the tram. The upper classes used to move around in coaches (and later on in cars), whereas the lower classes did not count yet for city officials (unless it were for philanthropic acts). The introduction of trams is therefore a sign that now the middle class gains power. Likewise, the appearance of sidewalks was generated by the unprecedented multitude of people in the streets, by the necessity to regulate chaos by order.

By the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, when European and North-American cities alike took a fresh start, townspeople became citizens, i.e. responsible inhabitants of cities, aware that they

should be involved in the city's welfare. This epoch is also characterized by an increased democratization of lifestyles, by a tendency of opening towards the others, of leveling middle class identities, viz. by the "European-ization" of identities, not only in Europe, but also in the Americas.

It is a well-known fact that the majority of the middle class in New York were of allogenous origins. Paradoxically enough, the very fact that so many inhabitants of New York came from elsewhere (other countries, towns, and villages) has lent a cosmopolitan character to the city. Allegedly, newcomers in big cities were not too sure of themselves, it was not easy for them to make others share their *Weltanschauung*; consequently, they were bound to accept the others, to tolerate other strangers.

John F. Kasson<sup>1</sup> synthesizes the phenomenon:

[In the 19<sup>th</sup> century] not only did the cityscape itself change naturally; so too did notions of social relationships, appropriate behavior, and individual identity. Alterations in the physical character of streets, commercial districts, parks, theatres, concert halls, and residential neighborhoods [...] were directly linked to changes in the kinds of activities that transpired in those public settings, as well as to a larger redefinition of the character of public and private life.

It is however also a fact that, as a rule, most people, no matter how emancipated, also carry about traces of their former identities and lifestyles from their places of origin in the countryside in other countries, in other towns. Once in the city, they may attempt to suppress these atavistic identities, but never manage to do so completely. Others may want to carry along their former identities in their new cities of origin. That is why most new comers in (no matter which) big cities were likely to have a hybrid identity.

That is why the framing of new, middle class urban and urbane identities was a must. To this end, a special kind of mass culture had to be devised. Conduct manuals played an essential part in this respect, as they were explicitly addressed to members of the middle class, urging them to have an urban and urbane behavior, in compliance with the new surrounding reality.

A strong reason to talk about manners in connection with the moulding of citadine identities in the very etymology of the terms belonging to this semantic family: "politeness"

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<sup>1</sup> John F. Kasson, *Rudeness and Civility. Manners in Nineteenth-Century Urban America*. New York, Hill and Wang, 1990, p. 4.

comes from *polis*, “civility” comes from *civis,-is*, whereas “urban” and “urbane” originate in *urbs,-is*.

It ought to be specified that hardly ever were conduct manuals pure etiquette books. In most cases, they continued the medieval tradition of the genre, and also included practical advice about curing minor diseases, removing spots, making fruit preserve, etc. This characteristic is by no means irrelevant. It is a sign that politeness, ought to have been part of household knowledge.

The utmost importance of conduct manuals in the period under discussion is also due to the fact that in the 19<sup>th</sup> century people’s public image holds pride of place. Inhabitants of cities are more careful than ever about the way in which they appear to others, about how they behave and how they dress. The (latter half of the) 19<sup>th</sup> century is an epoch of representation *par excellence*. Representation is a staging of identity. It means “I have nothing to hide”, as well as “This is the way I would like to appear”. By 1900, every big city was a theatre, while their inhabitants were actors. The middle class had leisure to represent themselves as well as to observe each other. A good illustration of the theatrical character of daily life copying other people’s behavior is offered by many of O. Henry’s short stories, as well as by several other fictional texts of the time. The following excerpt from Dreiser’s *Sister Carrie* (chapter XXXI) is symptomatic in this respect<sup>2</sup>:

“The walk down Broadway [...] was one of the remarkable features of the city. There gathered, before the matinee and afterwards, not only all the pretty women who love a showy parade, but the men who love to gaze upon and admire them. [...] In all her stay in the city, Carrie had never heard of this showy parade, had never even been on Broadway when it was taken place. [...] Carrie stepped along easily enough after they got out of the car at Thirty-fourth Street, but soon fixed her eyes upon the lovely company which swarmed by and with them as they proceeded. [...] To stare seemed the proper and natural thing. [...] With a start, she awoke to find that she was in fashion’s crowd, on parade in a show place [...] The whole street bore the flavour of riches and show [...]”.

The present paper will analyze conduct manuals issued in New York and Bucharest around 1900, while bearing in mind that the middle class was a *dynamic* social category besides being conservative.

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<sup>2</sup>Theodore Dreiser, *Sister Carrie*. New York, Barnes and Noble, [1900] 2005, pp. 275-276.

*American Codes. General characteristics*

Roughly until the Civil War, the model for conduct literature in the United States had been the book written by Lord Chesterton, a British writer from the previous century. Almost a hundred years after the Independence War, as far as the prescribed good manners were concerned, the US were still “British”, while New York city was still “provincial”.

This paradigm begins to change around 1800, when a new way of preaching manners is inaugurated. The Bibliography compiled by Arthur M. Schlessinger (1947) includes “aside from frequent revisions and new editions, twenty-eight different manuals [which] appeared in the 1830s, twenty-six in the 1840s, and thirty-eight in the 1850s – an average of over three new ones annually in the pre-Civil War decades”<sup>3</sup>

As was only to be expected, the number of conduct manuals increased spectacularly after the Civil War, when all fields of society developed rapidly. The same researcher specifies that, in the 1870-1914 interval, “the flow of volumes rose to a rate of five or six a year”<sup>4</sup>.

Kasson also explains<sup>5</sup> that “of the more than 150 etiquette manuals [...] published between 1830 and 1910, approximately half appeared anonymously or pseudonymously”. Books were signed by “an American lady”, “a woman of fashion”, “a gentleman”, “a member of New York’s most exclusive social circles”, “one of the four hundred”, or even “Censor” or “Mentor”.

However, this rhetorical device was by no means typically American; also many European authors of conduct manuals used to conceal their names, thus hinting at the general (even universal) validity of etiquette books, meant to express the collective mentalities of the “best” society. The absence of a proper signature on the cover page was meant as an illustration of the precept of modesty and inconspicuousness expanded upon within the book.

The range of intended recipients also diversified after the Civil War (1860-1865). Conduct manuals were no longer exclusively addressed to the upper classes: roughly 90 p.c. of the texts were now meant for the middle class; this was a sign of the democratization of American society, a token that the middle class had taken over. On the other hand, very few of these texts were addressed to the lower classes, and none of them mentioned recent immigrants in any capacity whatever.

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<sup>3</sup>John F. Kasson, *Rudeness and Civility. Manners in Nineteenth-Century Urban America*. New York: Hill and Wang, 1990, p. 44.

<sup>4</sup>Loc. cit.

<sup>5</sup>Op. cit. p. 48.

According to the same statistics<sup>6</sup>, the intended audience of conduct manuals was evenly divided as to the sex, while 20 p.c. of them were claiming to be intended for the use of young people. Thus, the social importance of both women and youth was considerably enhanced. Even if it was only natural for (this kind of) didactic texts to be addressed to young people, viz. to citizens during their formation period, and even if etiquette traditionally belonged to “women’s sphere”, it is nevertheless a fact that, in this way, women’s and young people’s position in collective mentalities was strengthened, and that in the future these categories were to play a relevant part in society; although how distant this future was to be is a different matter.

As for the codes’ authorship, if in the 1820-1860 interval some 75 p.c. of the conduct works were written by American authors, after the Civil War the percentage was much higher. Even though texts continued to borrow from the works of European authors (mainly French and English ones), they explicitly claimed to devise a “truly American and Republican” code of manners. Notwithstanding, American texts were only slightly more democratic than European (British) ones. They could hardly have been. Manners are the same everywhere; they stipulate respect for the Other as well as for oneself. As a means of *captatio benevolentiae*, codes professed to be “truly American”, although they continued to take Europe as a model. While on the one hand this was only too natural – after all, not much can be invented as regards good manners –, on the other hand, this characteristic illustrates the basic Americans’ dilemma in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, i.e. their oscillation between the desire to be European and the need to be different.

#### *A few samples*

Since there are too many conduct manuals issued in the US in the 19<sup>th</sup> century (Kasson’s selective bibliography lists 120 titles), this survey will only refer to a few relevant texts which came out in the 1865-1914 span.

One of the most famous books of its kind was Sarah Josepha Hale’s *Manners; or Happy Homes and Good Society*; it was published in 1868 in Boston – a city which seems to have preserved an aura of New England gentility.

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<sup>6</sup> Schlessinger apud Kasson

Hale emphasizes<sup>7</sup>, not at all unexpectedly, that “the home is woman’s battlefield, not the public space”, she is open-minded and far-sighted enough to claim that “Radical changes are required in American life. We need better means of education for women”<sup>8</sup>.

The second part of the book, entitled “Shaping an American home” includes a set of practical advice, e.g. no one should build a house without consulting an architect.<sup>9</sup> as well as some mild criticism, e.g. “Americans usually burden themselves with too much luggage.”<sup>10</sup>.

The precepts included in the book are not exempted from a tinge of nationalism. Thus, Sarah Hale contends that by sticking to religion and traditional moral values, the United States had won the position held by Rome in Antiquity<sup>11</sup>. Nationalism is also an outcome of the sophisticated rhetoric Hale makes use of. Thus, in the second part, she contends that “George Washington conquered where Aristotle and Bacon both failed: he was a hero in home life, as well as on the battlefield”<sup>12</sup>. The following assertion, excerpted from the chapter “A lady’s dress” is also fairly nationalistic, though indirectly so: “America used to be looked upon as a country where excessive dress was a reproach. But Paris now stands preeminent for extravagance”<sup>13</sup>.

It is also interesting that, with Hale, as with most Americans of the time, Europe is not yet perceived as a whole; comparisons are made between what people do in the United States, on the one hand, and what is customary “in France and Belgium..., in Spain...”<sup>14</sup>.

From this point of view, things are somewhat different in the treatise *Sensible Etiquette of the best society. Customs, Morals and Manners, and Home Culture* by H.O. Ward (Mrs.) pseudonym of Clara-Sophia Bloomfield-Moore. The text came out in Philadelphia; its tenth edition dates from 1878. The book is explicitly addressed to Americans, with a view to integrating them in civilized European society. Hence many examples from, and comparisons between, the two continents.

Although in the latter half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century in Europe, there was no idea of “Europe” as an entity of civilization and lifestyles, in the American book under discussion, European identity is defined indirectly, by comparison with, and contrast to the US. Obviously, “Europe” meant,

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<sup>7</sup>Sarah Josepha Hale, *Manners; or Happy Homes and Good Society All the Year Round*. Boston, Tilton & Co., 1868, p. 13.

<sup>8</sup>Op. cit. p. 356.

<sup>9</sup>Op. cit. p. 65.

<sup>10</sup>Op. cit. p. 129.

<sup>11</sup>Cf. op. cit. p. 17.

<sup>12</sup>Op. cit. p. 196.

<sup>13</sup>Op. cit. p. 237.

<sup>14</sup>Op. cit. p. 131.

first and foremost, France and England, plus a few other countries where Americans (as well as English people) used to travel, i.e. Italy, Switzerland, Germany, Spain. Comparisons are made in an unsophisticated, colloquial style, so as to be easily understood, and to bring Europe “closer” to the reader, e.g. “Ladies in American cities have much more license than in European society”<sup>15</sup>.

This book is also not exempted from a tinge of nationalism, meant to dispel the readers’ possible inferiority complexes and make them adopt European manners more easily. As the subtitle indicates, “home culture” is also given pride of place; as usual, behavior is based on social rules and traditions (“customs”), and then, little by little, it goes down to “home culture”.

Ward’s *Sensible Etiquette* is equally relevant for voicing the increased tendency of New York City to become the “center” of the US in collective mentalities. Thus, the author refers to Longstreet’s 1879 *Social Etiquette in New York*, specifying that “it was written in response to numerous and constant applications from all parts of the country, for information regarding social forms and usages in New York City” [Therefore] it is thoroughly reliable as to the customs of certain circles in New York”<sup>16</sup>. In this way, New York City is both looked up to, for setting the fashion, and indirectly looked down on for encouraging exclusivism.

As the 19<sup>th</sup> century drew to a close, conduct manuals were published nearly everywhere in the US. If the general tendency was to promote more and more “democratic” and unsophisticated manners, old-fashioned etiquette did not disappear altogether. A possible example is John H. Young’s *Our Deportment, or the Manners, Conduct and Dress of the Most Refined Society*, which came out in Detroit, Michigan, in 1882. Once again, home culture is indicated in the book’s second subtitle, and so is the rhetoric of letter-writing, viz. “Including forms for letters, invitations, etc., etc. Also valuable suggestions on housekeeping training.”

The manual argues the relevance of “Washington Etiquette” and accounts for the US President’s role in a highly civilized, refined society. However, the book also includes chapters on “The language of flowers” and “The language of precious stones”. Thus, Young’s *Deportment* proves obsolete for well-educated people, though perhaps not so obsolete for average or lower middle class Americans, whose ideas of civilized society were rather vague and definitely not very up-to-date.

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<sup>15</sup> H. O. Ward, *Sensible Etiquette of the Best Society. Customs, Morals and Manners, and Home Culture*. Philadelphia, Porter and Costes, 1878 (tenth edition), p. 217.

<sup>16</sup> Op. cit. p. 17.

A step further is reached by C. H. Payne's *Guides and Guards in Character Building*. All apparent crises of identity – middle classes vs. upper classes, Americans vs. Europeans, etc. – seem to have been solved. The well-balanced discourse sticks to traditional values, without overdue emphasis.

By the end of the century, in New York, Mrs. Julie M. Dewey published one of the first didactic texts proper in this field, entitled *How to Teach Manners in the School-Room*. The book's introduction emphasizes the obvious truth that “many children have no opportunity of obtaining a knowledge of good manners, either by practice or precept, except as it is offered by the schools.”<sup>17</sup> Therefore, teaching manners in schools is seen as a means of social leveling, and good manners' social utility is beyond doubt.

At this juncture, it is important to notice that politeness is considered a must not only in society, but also in business. One of the first signals in this respect was given by James Dabney McCabe's *National Encyclopedia of Business and Social Forms, Embracing the Laws of Etiquette and Good Society*, which came out in Philadelphia in 1879 and had several reprints in the following years.

If nearly all the previous codes had included a chapter dedicated to “how to get rich”, thus humoring most Americans' obsession with wealth, the above quoted books takes a step further: it is one of the first conduct manuals where “business [forms]” and “social forms” intermingle on the very title page.

However, the most relevant text in this subclass was *Hill's Manual of Social and Business Forms*. It was published in Chicago in 1873. It emphasizes the role of accurate grammar, spelling, and rhetoric in conducting successful business relations and in leading an “approved” social life. The author claims, not at all inadvertently, that writing is an important for success in society as is speaking and “acting”. To note that “acting” means “taking actions” rather than “play acting”. The manual covers, exhaustively but rather at random, all possible fields – both public and private – in which correct spelling and grammar, as well as well-balanced rhetoric are absolute requirements. Secretarial work is given pride of place in the enumeration. The book's subtitle runs: “A Guide to Correct Writing, with Approved Methods in Speaking and Acting in the Various Relations of Life, Embracing Instructions and Examples in Penmanship, Spelling, Use of Capital Letters, Punctuations, Composition, Writing for the Press, Proof-Reading,

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<sup>17</sup> Julia M. Dewey, *How to Teach Manners in the Schoolroom*. New York: The A.S. Barnes Company, 1888, p. 13.



Epistolary Correspondence, Notes of Invitation, Cards, Commercial Forms, Family Records, Synonyms, Short-Hand Writing, Duties of Secretaries, Parliamentary Rules, Sign Writings, Epitaphs, the Laws of Etiquette, Writing Poetry, etc.

The book seems to have been a great success; in 1882, nine years after its *princeps* edition, it had reached its 33<sup>rd</sup> edition.

### *Provisional Conclusions*

Summing up this brief survey of American conduct manuals in the latter half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, a few general remarks can be made concerning the way in which identity was viewed at the time, viz.

1) American identities are nearly always compared to European ones. Even if certain aspects (e.g. Parisian fashion) of the latter are sometimes slightly ridiculed, Europe is always taken as a model.

2) However, all the codes openly announce their intention of framing a typically *American* identity of their intended readers.

3) As conduct manuals intend to amend morals and manners, a few aspects of American lifestyles are mildly criticized.

4) According to the etiquette books I have scanned, the basic – and most praiseworthy – characteristic of American identities is sticking to (Christian) religion and to other traditional moral values and customs.

5) A slightly nationalistic attitude is voiced by all etiquette books. Readers should be proud of being Americans. This is only to be expected since, in most cases, it was the nationality of their (ancestors') choice.

6) The US President, as a symbol of the American nation, and Washington, D.C., as the headquarters of the White House, are sometimes (cf. Young) dedicated a few paragraphs; nevertheless, in nearly all etiquette books, New York City is considered to set the fashion as regards good manners; in collective mentalities, it is the most important American city (cf. Longstreet).

7) Etiquette books authored by women (Hale, Ward, Dewey) mildly advocate the necessity of better education for women, while explaining that American ladies enjoy more leisure in society than European ladies do.

8) By the end of the century, teaching manners in schools is also considered a necessity, as many children had had no other opportunity of learning how to behave. Public schools are thus indirectly considered as an essential democratization means of American society.

9) Politeness in business relationships is also awarded pride of place (Young, McCabe, Hill), so is the accurate use of language, both as regards grammar and spelling, and as far as adequate rhetoric is concerned.

10) Not all etiquette books voice an advanced mentality; even towards the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, some texts (cf. Young) describe the language of flowers and the language of precious stones. As American culture has no tradition as regards this kind of codes, we assume that the references to flowers and precious stones was inserted as a kind of “curiosity” much rather than as a useful piece of knowledge in a democratic society.

11) If New York City is the acknowledged core of American high society, a reverence is also paid to Washington, D.C., in its capacity of federal capital, and headquarters of the President.

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