As the son of a 1930s communist, a Hollywood screenwriter forced into exile by the 1950s red scare, I was dispirited that many on the left, along with liberals and centrists—not least *The New York Times* editorial board, were so scornful towards Mayor Rudolph Giulian's civility initiative. For many contemporary progressives, issues of "self-expression" through provocation, especially through clothing, speech and sexual behavior, seem much more important than they were to my father's generation.

Although much of 1960s radicalism has been abandoned, many boomer progressives cling to the ethos of informality. For them, the rejection of what is taken to be bourgeois civility remains a symbol of political virtue. Civility's advocates tend to be either younger or older than the boomers. Perhaps their generational distance allows them to see that some Victorian-style social restraints have had real psychological and symbolic benefits, especially for the more vulnerable people in society.

Leftists of my father's generation had little time for the pseudo-proletarian dress and manners affected by many sixties radicals. [These were was intended as a symbol of solidarity with the workng class, but old leftists saw it as at best a kind of bourgeois false consciousness and at worst a disgustingly patronizing gesture.] As the baby boomers have taken control of the levers of power they have [consolidated] their sartorial revolution. In Silicon Valley software firms, everyone wears jeans and works in "open plan" offices that are supposed to foster teamwork as opposed to hierarchy, and any Microsoft employee is free to enjoy the illusory egalitarianism of calling the company's C.E.O. "Bill." Meanwhile, younger partners in Wall Street law firms institute "dress-down Fridays" then eventually move to a regime of chinos and polo shirts for every day of the week. The sartorial Iron Heel is on the defensive. Three cheers for the revolution; now get back to work [making money?].

When it came to manners, the New Left carried the day not just against the old left, but against bourgeois society itself. But a skeptic might wonder if the ethos of civility was less than crucial to Capital's rule and suspect that the rejection of civility by privileged people was a rebellion by the bourgeoisie against some of the few restraints it imposed upon itself. Leftists should consider whether this revolution in manners was so significant a victory, or whether, as Eric Hobsbawm once observed, it is much easier to epater the bourgeois than to overthrow him. onsider the political implications of "respect," "pride" and "dignity." The sometimes homicidal fury of members of the black underclass when they feel they have been "dissed" should indicate just how untrivial civility issues really are. In the old South, the refusal of whites to behave with civility to blacks was profoundly important. In any caste system, institutionalized incivility is a key means of letting [certain groups of] people know where they stand.

In our own society, civility is neither accorded to everyone nor expected of anyone as of right—not least because civil behavior is no longer required of the upper middle class. In a genuinely egalitarian society, general rules of civility should constrain the powerful as much as the powerless, and even in an older and very unequal society they at times did just that. Without any such rules, money still has the power to extort civility: The waiter is polite to the people who pay his tip. The revolution in manners means that the market now decides who gets respect, who is treated politely, who is insulated by civility. I doubt that the poor experience civility as condescension. But I am certain that working class people, especially African-American working class people, are often outraged by inappropriate informality. Cultural class conflict of this kind may well have played an important role in the chasm between the trade union movement and the anti-war movement during the Nixon years: Blue-collar fury was not just a matter of simple outraged patriotism. When students wore jeans and workshirts—the uniform of working people—real workers often saw it as subtle form of mockery.

An anecdote may illustrate the point. An academic friend teaches sometimes in jeans, rarely wears a tie and never thinks twice about it. A working-class colleague said to him, "There are three of us teaching here, and all of us wear a coat and tie to class. To us it's a sign of a hard-won, precarious status. I don't know what it means to you." My friend is always confident that he will be accorded upper-middle-class status in the circles that matter to him . He can dip in and out of informality at will because of this confidence; a good salary or private income does wonders in this respect. The poor are not so confident about their status, and have no recourse against systematic disrespect. We should be careful about assuming that symbolic rebellions by the privileged will be read as intended by the less privileged. To paraphrase the playwright Tom Stoppard, ridiculing the virtue of civility is most comfortably done from a first-class railway carriage.

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