

WESTERN UNIVERSITY
DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH AND WRITING STUDIES
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English 2260F:
National and Global Perspectives on Cultural Studies

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Topic: Corporeal courtesy: politeness, disgust, and fear of the “improper” body in a globalized world

Politeness, good manners, etiquette, courtesy: the very terms seem to belong unequivocally to the past, perhaps to the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Yet, it can be argued, forms of politeness are as important as ever, although the term itself has fallen into disuse (the preferred term among political theorists is “civility”). As Norbert Elias has taught us, the historical growth of politeness (what he calls “the civilizing process”) involves an increasing suspicion of the body and an increasingly careful monitoring of its capacity to overflow its boundaries and encroach on the space of others. In a world of individuals who aspire to cosmopolitan tolerance and restraint, politeness, though it has been detached from morality, continues to be a valued commodity; and ideals of politeness typically involve control of the body and of modes of speech. In cosmopolitan spaces where overt discrimination seems to have withered away, discourses of dirt and contagion (often applied to the immigrant body) have paradoxically flourished, perhaps as a form of displacement. This course traces and explores some of the multiple discourses of politeness, drawing especially on Freud’s discussion of civilization’s “war on dirt” and the thwarting of infantile polymorphous perversity, Norbert Elias’s discussion of the civilizing process, Mary Douglas’s work on dirt, purity and danger, Julia Kristeva’s ideas of abjection, Iris Marion Young’s discussions of the “proper” bourgeois white body, Erving Goffman’s discussions of everyday negotiations of interacting bodies, and Pierre Bourdieu’s theory of a bodily *habitus*.