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On the Sociogenesis of US Dating Regime and its Present-Day Social Legacy

Cas Wouters

My research project of recent years consists of a study of changes in American, Dutch, English and German manners books from 1890 to 2000. The research design of historical and international comparison focuses on changes and differences in the codes and ideals of manners and self-regulation in the relationships between people of different rank and gender. My book *Sex and Manners* (2004) focuses on the latter; special attention goes to changes and differences in courting and dating regimes. How did these regimes change? More specifically: what changes can be found in manners books (and also dating advisories) regarding the socially organized opportunities and limitations to courting possibilities enabling young people to be alone together, to go somewhere alone together, and eventually to find and choose a partner in love and sex.

Around 1890, in all four countries under study, courting was practiced in similar ways. It was done mainly by calling, the young man calling at her parents house. Young people who oriented themselves to the dominant code of good manners first had to get their parents' approval to commit themselves to an engagement before it was accepted to touch and kiss. They could become acquainted at particular social gatherings such as dinners, parties and balls, most of them given in private drawing-rooms. A young man could court a young woman by expressing a special interest in her. If he did, she could ask him to visit her at home, that is, to call at her parents' home. If she didn't, she was either insensitive to his courting behaviour or unable to secure her parents' consent to the invitation. When he called, he was received in a room where someone else would be present or within hearing distance. If his calling was continued, these visits were expected to culminate in his proposal of marriage. If she and her parents would accept such a proposal, the couple would first become »engaged« to be married. Sexual experimenting was explicitly excluded from this »engagement«. It was generally expected that most couples would »fall« and give in to temptation if/when given the opportunity. Therefore, even when engaged, the respectable couple would not be left alone much and chaperones would accompany them wherever they went. This was the prevailing courting regime in all four countries under study.

From the 1890s until the 1920s, courting manners generally showed the same overall development: young people started to »date«, that is, to go out together, both with and without a chaperon. The main difference emerged in the early 1920s as a dating regime developed in the USA. This implied an earlier and more open integration of sexuality into courting practices. Together with the word date, a whole »family« of words and practices entered US (youth) culture and were developed further. Dating spread rather quickly and dating codes became elaborate enough to speak of a dating system or a dating regime. The practice itself, however, is not an American invention as in all countries under study, full surveillance via the chaperon system was eroding.

In her fascinating study of the dating system, Beth Bailey assumes a period of transition, in which a man might have come on a »call«, expecting to be received in her family's parlor, while »she had her hat on«, expecting a »date«, that is, to be taken »out« somewhere and entertained in some public place or commercial amusement. By the mid-1920s, dating had almost completely replaced the old system of calling. The specifically American characteristics of the dating system become apparent from the 1920s onward, when advice on dating, necking, petting, and the »line« appears in American manners books only. Its appearance signifies the escape of young people from under parental wings and the formation of a relatively autonomous courting regime of their own – the dating regime. This regime was a novelty in the history of the relationship between the sexes, and it led to a head start in the emancipation of sexuality and to the first youth culture – restricted to the USA in contrast to the youth culture of the 1960s, which was a western international one. The sociogenesis of the dating system can be sketched by presenting five uniquely US characteristics in the development of dating and courting:

- 1.

The first one is the genesis of necking and petting in combination with the fact that these sexual practices were openly debated. Among the early symptoms is the complaint of an advisor of the *Ladies' Home Journal* in 1907 »that young men and women between about fifteen and twenty »expected« handholding and kissing« (Bailey). In following decades, these expectations would expand. Handholding and kissing and caresses above the neck became generally known as necking, whereas petting came to refer to caresses below the neck, expanding to every caress known to married couples except complete sexual intercourse. In the 1930s, the question of »how far to go« beyond kissing came up with almost any »date«, because courtship practices had permitted and stimulated a »thrill-seeking behavior« that had turned courtship

into »an amusement and a release of organic tensions«, and kissing into an activity that »may imply no commitment of the total personality whatsoever« (Waller 1937). Necking and petting as inherent possibilities made dating highly sexually oriented, but also sexually restrained as the sexual exploration was to remain without sexual consummation. In that sense, dating was oriented toward sex *and* marriage. The responsibility for sexual restraint was put in the hands of women. They had to know »how to meet the »jazz age« halfway, without destroying any of the old family standards« (Schlesinger 1946).

Women's bobbed hair can be taken as a symbol of a new lust balance, away from the Puritan position in which good women took no pleasure in sex, and bad women took no pleasure in anything else, to a »good-bad« middle ground between on the one hand their marital aspirations, demanding abstinence of all sexuality, even necking, and on the other hand their own burgeoning sexual interests. In her study of dating in the 1920s, Paula Fass (1977) explains the significance of bobbed hair. At the time, women were expected to tie up their long hair in public. Not to do so would be improper because untied hair had strong sexual connotations; a woman would only wear her (long) hair loose in company if sexuality would (going to be) part of that relationship. Therefore, wearing loose bobbed hair was liberating in two ways: it allowed her to be more self-consciously erotic and also to feel equal to men. It did not destroy old family standards nor marital aspirations, and yet it certainly was a symbol of explicit female sexuality, signalling the possibility of petting: restrained promiscuous sexual exploration. Wearing bobbed hair ranged among the early open promises of sexuality, a daring: »all are called«, so to speak, and this was increasingly becoming possible because the selection process in which »few are chosen« came to be based upon the principle of mutual attraction as much as on that of mutual consent, leaving the responsibility for whom to choose as well as for »how far to go« up to the woman. In this way, the protection provided by chaperones had been substituted by that of mutual consent.

Wearing bobbed hair signaled the middle ground of the good-bad girl, the one that reminded Margaret Mead of a couplet of the early twenties: »Won't somebody give me some good advice on how to be naughty and still be nice?« Mead convincingly showed, that during the dating period, »there is the imperative that one ought to be able to *play* with sex all the time, and win. The younger the boy and girl when they learn to play this *game* of partially incomplete, highly controlled indulgence of impulse, the more perfectly they can learn it.« This imperative stimulated increasing subtlety in the *art* of steering »between the rocks of prudery and coquetry« (Hemphill), for in order to »remain the winner, she must make the nicest discriminations between yielding and rigidity« (Gorer).

2.

»Play«, »game«, »art«, these words indicate another unique US characteristic: a date developed into sort of a dalliance relationship for the duration of the date and without any commitment to marriage. Another date might follow, but also follow-up dates did not imply marriage promises. Accordingly, the pair relationship of a date was not exclusive: as the dating system developed, it even encouraged experimental relations with numerous partners. Young people were advised to »have at least a dozen girl friends and boy friends that you like, that you are with often, that do things and have good times together« (Gillum). This kind of advice is uniquely American.

3.

A third such characteristic is that youth culture in general and dating in particular developed mainly on coeducational colleges and campuses: these villages for the young were uniquely American. A germ of this development can be found in the growth and structure of a national upper class in the nineteenth century. This growth was supported by various institutions, among which the New England boarding schools and the fashionable Eastern universities were very important. Then, »at the turn of the century, and especially after the First World War, these national upper-class family-surrogates began to educate the children of the rich and well-born from all cities in ever-increasing numbers« (Baltzell). Next to a critical degree of wealth and geographical mobility, it was this co-education at universities and colleges, which allowed for an emancipation of young people from under the wings of their parents. Between 1900 and 1930, there was a 300 percent increase of attendance at colleges and universities, while the increase in high-school enrolments was 650 percent. In the 1920s, two thirds of all students were at coeducational residential colleges, where they engaged in a rich peer life and were able to make their own code of courting behaviour in generational solidarity against the older generations. »The young were more and more orienting their behavior to non-traditional institutions – peers rather than parents, movies rather than the local community« (Fass). College youth of the 1920s could redefine the relationship between men and women, because their allegiance threatened and diminished the authority of adults. »Sex quickly became the key issue in the struggle that ensued« (Bailey). Negotiations between the generations produced new appearances to be kept up: »All colleges of good repute now insist on a list of patronesses who will give their presence as well

as their names to the fraternity dances, as a guarantee that these amusements will be conducted with the decorum of the private ball« (Wade 1924).

By the 1920s, »sex had become an important feature of campus affairs, and peers restricted associations, directed introductions, and set elaborate criteria for behaviour, selection, and propriety« (Fass). Petting soon became a controlled ritual, opening up possibilities of intimacy and response, but at the same time restricting spontaneity. Paula Fass writes that peer-group pressure turned petting into a convention and a necessary demonstration of conformity. »Experimental erotic exploration,« she writes, »was often a group phenomenon. The petting party (...) both forced erotic exploration and controlled the goal of eroticism.« The campus community was observed and experienced as a separate culture in which one could participate for only a few years, that is, »without significant long-term risk«.

The fact that college behaviour of the twenties filtered down to the high school by the thirties, may explain why Mrs Post in the 1931 edition of her million selling manners book, first published in 1922, finally paid some attention to the topic of petting; she even gave it a separate heading. However, she suffices with one line: »Petting«, she writes, »is quite outside the subject of etiquette – so far outside that it has no more place in distinguished society than any other actions that are cheap, promiscuous, or vulgar«. A few years later, Mrs Post is straightforwardly contradicted by another etiquette writer addressing girls who, as newcomers to the campus »are still an adventure to the men«:

So, of course, you want to make the most of your novelty. With skill, you can build lasting popularity for yourself for the rest of your four college years on campus. If you date often, you will have many opportunities to »neck«, in spite of Emily Post's claim that petting has no place in polite society. (College men, apparently, have never read her book.) Some of them approach the subject with romantic finesse, but most are more blunt. All of them are frankly curious to discover if you are a »hot number« or a »cold proposition«. That you must determine for yourself (...) (Eldridge 1936).

This may illustrate Beth Bailey's conclusion that young people's sexual experience was governed by two codes, both »the peer conventions that were insistently prescriptive, establishing petting, necking, and the »right« sexual attitudes as essential criteria for belonging to youth culture; and the official conventions of adult culture and authority, which were dogmatically proscriptive.« These two codes are more or less continued in/directly connected to the »double standard« of a dating code and a working code. But in both adult and youth codes, he paid, not she.

4.

This points to a fourth major difference between US dating and courting in other countries: a more uneven balance of power in US dating in favour of men and their money. Most probably this difference is rooted in the relatively early decline of control by the older generation. In the constitutive process of the new code of dating, the influence of young men will have been dominant for it was taken for granted that »boys will be boys«, that they and their »raging hormones« would »naturally« want some sexual activity, and that they will »go for it«, also because young men could blame a woman for all sexual acts, whether unsanctioned or uncalled for: either she had not set limits (in time) or she was not truly virtuous.

In the calling system, women were the hosts and they took the initiative. The dating regime of »going somewhere« made young women dependent on men's »treats«. Boys came to be the host, they paid, they took the initiative and, of course, they assumed the control that came with that position. Many have pointed to the connection between paying and »sexual favours«: »the more money the man spent, the more petting the woman owed him« and » »nice girls« cost a lot« (Bailey). Money purchased obligation; money purchased inequality; money purchased control. Young women were advised never to pay for themselves, even if they had money. The main reason is: men don't like that. Here's an example, addressing women: »Dutch treats have not worked. Too much independence on a girl's part subtracts from a man's feeling of importance if he takes her out and can do nothing for her. So, if you want to date college men, resort to more feminine ways of succeeding« (Eldridge 1936). And another book, addressing men presents the same argument, subverted: girls don't like that: »Avoid the Dutch treat, no matter how broke you are. Any girl would rather sit in the park than dine Dutch treat at the Ritz. A young man who lets a girl pay for her entertainment deserves to lose her respect« (Jonathan 1938).

Young men had monopolized the power resource of money, and under the strong pressures of competitive conformity in dating as a youth culture young women had allowed them to keep it. In their peer groups a young woman was »valued by the level of consumption she could demand (how much she was »worth«), and the man by the level of consumption he could provide« (Bailey). US dating became a »competitive activity dominated by money and consumer one-upmanship« (Caldwell 1999), a paying and petting competition.

5.

This open competitiveness of US dating is the fifth and last unique characteristic. Dating as a way of courting was a social contest for popularity, producing a peculiar mixture of competitive conformity, which may be symbolized by the words and practices at dances: once-arounder and getting stuck: for each girl, each dance and each boy cutting in counted in the popularity contest. The opposite of being a »once-arounder« was »getting stuck«: to get stranded with one partner. It is described as a highly visible catastrophe, taken quite seriously as a sign of social failure, worse than being a wallflower: »Getting stuck meant, quite simply, not getting cut in on. Gradually the woman's smile would grow brittle and desperate; the man would begin casting beseeching looks at possible rescuers. Everyone would notice (...)« (Bailey). These quotations demonstrate the formidable force of this external social control of peer pressure, the pressure to conform and to compete for popularity. Similarly, each date and each person dated counted and was rated in a popularity contest: »You had to rate in order to date, to date in order to rate. By successfully maintaining this cycle, you became popular. To stay popular, you competed (...) and being popular allowed you to compete« (Bailey). Petting became a convention and a necessary demonstration of conformity. Like petting, to some extent drinking and smoking also became a necessary demonstration of conformity. The ritual of petting opened up possibilities of intimacy and response, but at the same time it »laid the basis for the emotionally inhibiting cat-and-mouse game of staged seductions and »scoring« that continued to govern sexual relations among the young throughout the first half of the twentieth century« (Fass). A clear demonstration and symptom of the rating and dating, paying and petting popularity contest is the »line«, a well-rehearsed and oft-repeated set of phrases used in initial contacts between the sexes to flatter and charm: »Let yourself go! Let complements come irresistibly and spontaneously. Instead of a mere »you look nice tonight«, you might say in a profoundly stirred baritone, »That shade of blue does things to your eyes« (Jonathan 1938). And here's another quotation from thirty years later:

»A certain amount of exaggeration is customary between boys and girls (...). (W)hen a boy with a fast line meets a girl with a gullible disposition, she sometimes falls for him hook, line, and sinker. (...) Few dating experiences could be more painful than falling for a line, believing a boy truly loved you, giving him your own love, and then discovering that he was only fooling.« (McGinnis 1968)

As time went on, dating became a competitive quest of thrill and increasingly more sexed: »Even in high school, at least by the early 1940s, middle-class boys talked in terms of pushing petting as far as their dates would allow, if not farther, describing the whole experience as »having fun« or »taking them for a ride« (Stearns and

Knapp). Dating as well as the rest of the popularity contest spread to younger age groups.

Even considering the strong pressures towards conformity, it remains strange that women allowed the connection between paying and petting, that is, to be bought. Why weren't there any voices in favour of women keeping their independence by paying for themselves? In answering this question it seems important that the emancipation of young people from the control of older generations during the second (international) youth culture was soon followed by a wave of emancipation of women from the control of men: in the late 1970s, the women's movement in all western countries turned against sexual violence, that is, against male dominance. In the US of the 1920s, however, liberation from the regime of older generations was not followed by a liberation of male sexual dominance and oppression. US dating, the paying and petting codes in particular, can be interpreted as a consequence and as proof of this absence. The young had a common interest in breaking the taboo of the older generation, the no-sex-at-all taboo. And most girls will have clearly experienced the freedom they had gained in comparison to their mothers, but it did not occur to them to raise cutting questions about their youth culture in terms of the balance of power between the sexes.

To gain the right of being and staying (financially) independent and to pay for themselves was a necessary condition for escaping the drawing-room confinement, that is, for women's emancipation. However, in the USA, well into the 1970s, it was still taken for granted that he paid, and although the possibility of »going Dutch« is mentioned earlier, only from the 1970s onwards is it mentioned favourably. In the 1980s, this question »Should you offer to pay your own way or some of the expenses on a date?« was answered in a variety of ways, but also very negatively: »Certainly not! (...) If a man asks you out, he expects to pay for the whole evening. Any decent man would be insulted if you even suggested paying for yourself« (Cartland 1984). In the 1990s, it was still considered a difficult item among advisors. For instance, Lactitia Baldrige (1990) wrote: »The question of who pays for what on a date is as complicated and potentially embarrassing as the confusion among the parents of the bride and groom over who will pay for what in the wedding when the groom's family is assisting the bride with the financial responsibility.«

My US data suggest that in these years, while the code of courting or dating manners was maintained, a separate code for business situations developed, creating a contradiction between business manners and dating manners (in which the old good-Society relationships linger on), and that the two coexisting codes were solidified and kept apart: a double standard. Around 1980, for example, men in all four countries came under attack for sexual harassment. Everywhere this implied that at work, making a pass at someone in an inferior social position was tabooed, but in the USA virtually all flirting at work was branded as harassment. In this country, the

struggle for greater equality seems to be harder and tougher. Another example is a book called *The Rules*: »Equality and Dutch treat are fine in the workplace, but not in the romantic playing field. Love is easy when the man pursues the woman and pays for the woman most of the time« (Fein and Schneider 1995).

Considering the fact that the double standard implies that women at work are likely to be treated more on the basis of equality than at home, it is no surprise, therefore, that many will tend to feel better (treated) at work than at home. They experience their working hours as a comparative rest, as more leisurely than the hours they have to put in their »second« shift at home.

Who paid the servants (...) owned their allegiance, and who pays the piper, calls the tune. Beth Bailey emphasizes exactly this connection by concluding that »the centrality of men's money in dating conferred power – and control of the date – upon men.« I propose to connect this double standard of business and dating manners in an explanatory way to the initial head start of American youth in escaping from under parental wings and developing the dating system. The codes of this system reflected the uneven balance of power between the sexes prevalent at the time. These remained vividly alive until the 1960s and even became part of an American tradition, and as such firmly internalized. Thus, the social legacy of the dating system came to function as a barrier and slowed up the emancipation of women and (their) sexuality. This is one of the reasons why the US eventually came to lag behind: the initial lead hardened and caused traditional double morality to be and remain stronger in the USA than in the other countries under study.

In a similarly explanatory way, the head start in the emancipation of sexuality can be related to the reputed fascination of Americans for breasts and oral sex, that is, »blow jobs«, for »eating pussy« is comparatively far less celebrated (again signalling a rather male-dominated sexuality). The gradual social acceptance of petting in the 1920s, but explicitly not of »going all the way« (and preservatives hard to get), will have channelled sexual experimenting and sexual excitement equally gradual from breast fondling at first, towards oral sex later. The boasting and bragging about these pleasures will have hardened into a cultural fashion and subsequently into an enduring fascination with breasts and oral sex, a »national characteristic«. In the same process, other all-American inventions may have originated such as the lap dance. The competitive attitude that was institutionalized in the dating regime soon was stretched out to a commercial attitude as it developed into »petting and paying«, and ever since the 1960s into an expanding massive consumption of sex bought on a market.

Next to this youth-culture dating code the other adult-code part of the double standard was maintained in the demand of sexual abstinence outside marriage, but at the same time this demand was hollowed out via constructing »technical virginity« as a bridge between the adult code and the youth code. The view of »technical

virginity« allows for all sexual acts except for sexual penetration because only penetration counts as sex.

The reputedly advanced greater freedom and independence of women in America seems to have disappeared. My material suggests that this can be understood from the social legacy of a dating regime in which male dominance was established, formalized, and subsequently more or less fossilized.

References

Please see the register in my book *Sex and Manners. Female Emancipation in the West 1890–2000*. London: Sage 2004.