

## American Jerk

*We have arrived at simultaneously the most and least civil moment in U.S. history...*

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<https://www.utne.com/arts/american-jerk-be-civil-or-ill-beat-you-to-a-pulp>

**by Todd Schwartz, from Oregon Humanities**



**image by Jesse Kuhn**

It was the most civil of times, it was the least civil of times, it was the age of politeness, it was the age of boorishness, it was the epoch of concern, it was the epoch of who cares, it was the season of hybrid, it was the season of Hummer, it was the spring of Obama, it was the winter of hate speech . . .

With apologies to Mr. Dickens (or not: screw him), we have arrived at simultaneously the most and least civil moment in U.S. history. A moment when a roomful of even relatively evolved people will react with discomfort to an off-color joke about people of color—and when those same people have no compunction whatsoever about loudly ignoring one another as they blather into their cell phones.

We have never been more concerned about the feelings of minority groups, the disabled, and the disadvantaged. Yet we have never been less concerned about the feelings of anyone with whom we share the road, the Internet, or the movie theater.

Political correctness holds such sway that holidays go unnamed for fear of insulting or excluding someone. Schools won't let teachers use red pens to correct papers, because little Ethan's or Emily's self-esteem might be bruised. No one is "poor," but many are "socioeconomically disadvantaged." Civility and thoughtfulness in speech have never been so complete or so codified.

All of which is well intentioned and mostly a wonderful thing. I'm all for being polite and caring and Golden Rule-ish. Sadly, like a lovely field of wildflowers—which in reality is filled with bloodsucking ticks and noxious pollen—we live oh-so-politely in what must certainly be the rudest era in recorded history. Maybe even prehistory.

Neanderthals were probably nicer to each other than we are.

Pick your poison: reality television, slasher movies, video games, online porn, cell phones, automated answering systems, giant assault vehicles for trips to the grocery store, car stereos played at volumes easily heard on Jupiter, web-powered copyright infringement, people who will not shut their inane traps in movie theaters, and, lord help us, now even people who won't shut their inane traps during live theater.

We're all talking to someone all the time, but it's ever more rarely to the people we are actually with. Our cell phones blare ringtones that no one else wants to hear. We love to watch TV shows about the stunningly predictable results of hand-feeding a grizzly bear or lighting a stick of dynamite with a cigarette. We also love shows where people lie to others for money and programs where snarky, slightly talented folks say vicious things to hopeful, and usually more talented, contestants.

Civility rules, friends.

Civility is dead, jerks.

Why? I have a few theories.

The first is that America is in the same position as Rome found itself in about 420 CE, meaning that we've reached the peak of our civilization and now everything is going to Tartarus in a chariot. We're too far from our food and energy sources, and fewer and fewer of the Druids and Visigoths like us anymore. So we desperately cling to a patina of civility while we grab a snack and watch large, toothy predators devour people.

The second is that sunlight contains tiny spores that lodge in the cerebellum, making the infected believe they are the center of the universe.

My final and somewhat less cutting edge theory is that a large percentage of people are just clueless, distracted, and self-absorbed, unable to process concepts such as spatial awareness (for example: when you are walking in the same direction with several hundred people in, say, an airport terminal, DON'T JUST STOP IN THE MIDDLE OF THE FLOW!).

But I digress.

I am not here to judge whether being civil and considerate is somehow better than being a mindless dillweed. You must make that choice for yourself. We inhabit the most civil of times and the least—and I completely honor and respect your freedom to choose your side in the Great Civility War.

Just don't get in my way. I'm on my cell in the Escalade, and I can't be bothered.

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