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A PARTISAN VIEW

Sarcasm, Satire, and Irony as Voices in Erving Goffman's *Asylums*

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ETHNOGRAPHY ABOUND. Define ethnography as the description of a scene, setting, group, or organization, and one finds that, like Moliere's Monsieur Jourdain, amazed at being able to speak prose, we write ethnography without awareness. Yet, only certain ethnographic texts are privileged. The academic guilds have a special slot for "ethnographic scholarship," and some works are so classified.

Within this classification reside styles of discourse (Van Maanen 1988; Geertz 1988); the possible voices are diverse, though perhaps not as diverse as within "non-fiction" or "realistic fiction." If not all ethnography can be classified as a "realist tale," all ethnography is "realistic" in another sense—the implicit claim is that what has been depicted "actually" happened, even recognizing that the story could be told in several ways, varying with the persona of the author, character of the audience, and attitudes toward the focus, or that in some cases the claims may reflect a composite reality.

One predominant characteristic of ethnography, and of scientific discourse generally, is its serious and sedate mien (Fine 1988). This diverges from modes of description that accord emotions (humor, passion, pathos, or tragedy) a respected place. Scientific writing "should be" emotion-free. Emotion, if included, resides in segregated prefaces, acknowledgements, or methodological appendixes. Yet, despite the normative expectations, emotion does creep into ethnographic description. It should not be surprising that a discourse heavily dependent on the authorial presence (e.g. Clifford 1988) will incorporate

the feelings of the author. Emotion presumes that the author's self is positioned in the text, and, so, we find echoes of fear, sadness, and exaltation.

In this article, we focus on a small corner of emotion-laden writing: the use of humor in ethnographic description. As is widely known, humor contributes to rhetorical effectiveness (e.g., Gruner 1979); yet, this technique is infrequently employed in social scientific writing. To demonstrate potential uses of humor, and particularly a few subtypes—sarcasm, satire, and irony, we examine a single book: Erving Goffman's *Asylums: Essays on the Social Situation of Mental Patients and Other Inmates*. Our goal is to demonstrate the possibilities of humorous ethnographic writing, rather than to demonstrate the frequency of such writing. While sarcasm, satire, and irony are recognized categories of humor, they are by no means an exhaustive list. They are, however, three forms used vigorously by Goffman.

By virtue of its production, *Asylums* (1961) is a *book*; it is also a set of four essays, related, but with different tones and with little explicit connection. All are based upon Erving Goffman's ethnographic research at St. Elizabeth's Hospital in Washington, DC. *Asylums* is regarded as a classic work in medical sociology, deviance, and symbolic interactionism, and it has reoriented policy by helping to demolish the justification for large state mental institutions (Goldstein 1979, 399; Price and Smith 1983, 413). Some of our homeless must thank and blame Goffman for their circumstances and for the circumstances they have avoided.

In this account, we focus on three humorous techniques: sarcasm, satire, and irony—forms that overlap more than slightly. For purposes of this essay we argue inexactly that each characterizes one of Goffman's three humorous essays ("The Moral Career of the Mental Patient" is serious and more "scholarly" than its mates). "On the Characteristics of Total Institutions" (pp. 1-124) is characterized by sarcasm; "The Underlife of a Public Institution: A Study of Ways of Making Out in a Mental Hospital" (pp. 125-70) is largely satiric; and "The Medical Model

and Mental Hospitalization: Some Notes on the Vicissitudes of the Tinkering Trades" (pp. 321-86) should be seen as ironic. Goffman does not use any one mode exclusively in any essay, but a certain tone predominates each one. We make no claim for what might or might not have been intended by Goffman in his act of writing.

Humor is a technique for persuading an audience, even when relying on the presentation of ethnographic data. Humor admits a challenging authorial stance, while avoiding explicit political commitment and a need to state one's own solution.

That persuasion is a concern of Goffman's is evident in his prefatory comments about focusing on patients, as opposed to other denizens of a mental hospital. Goffman writes:

The world view of a group functions to sustain its members and expectedly provides them with a self-justifying definition of their own situation and a prejudiced view of non-members, in this case, doctors, nurses, attendants, and relatives. To describe the patient's situation faithfully is necessarily to present a *partisan view*. (For this last bias I partly excuse myself that the imbalance is at least on the *right side of the scale*, since almost all professional literature on mental patients is written from the point of view of the psychiatrist, and he, socially speaking, is on the other side.) . . . Finally, unlike some patients, I came to the hospital with no great respect for the discipline of psychiatry nor for agencies content with its current practices. (Goffman 1961, x; emphasis added)

The underlined phrases suggest a double meaning. On one level Goffman claims the perspective of the mental patient has not been considered sufficiently, but simultaneously he charges that *they are morally preferable* to their keepers. Recall the meanings of "partisan" (as defined in *Webster's*): "1: one that takes the part of another: SUPPORTER 2a: a member of a body of detached light troops making forays and harassing an enemy b: a member of a guerilla band operating within enemy lines" (1965: 614). Perhaps Goffman relished definition 2b. Goffman's role as an assistant to the athletic director (at St. Elizabeth's) and as a grant recipient (from the National Institute from Mental Health) suggest the significance of "partisan."

