Erving Goffman and the Gestural Dynamics of Modern Selfhood

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In memory of Clifford Geertz

In another decade or two, we may be in a position to historicize the trend to see 'bodily practices' as an important topic for cultural and historical studies. Currently, however, we seem to be in the phase of ancestor worship, the nascent gods being people like Mary Douglas, Norbert Elias, Michel Foucault, and Erving Goffman. Because I have a long-standing interest in Goffman, I was more than pleased to accept Michael Braddick's invitation to participate in the *Past and Present* conference on 'The Politics of Gesture'. I decided to use the opportunity to examine Goffman's notion of the modern self in relationship to gesture, understood as both an analytic construct and a feature of social action. In what follows I will sketch a set of theoretical issues that I found implicit in our conference abstract, which framed our topic in terms of a distinction between gesture and ritual. I will then offer a reading of Goffman's work in terms of those issues.

Gesture and ritual as analytic terms

Within sociocultural anthropology, and probably within history as well, 'gesture', unlike 'ritual', has never really attained the status of a technical term and a topic of study. Technical terms, or analytic concepts, are notoriously unreliable tools in social science, probably for reasons Durkheim, in his treatise on methodology, recognized but dismissed.[1] Despite the dream of a scientific language sufficiently detached from social reality to be able to treat it with objectivity, most analytic terms in anthropology and sociology are drawn from an existent social world, usually that of the analyst. They are, therefore, at once analytic terms and 'native terms', and the angle of approach they

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[1] Emile Durkheim, *The Rules of Sociological Method*, trans. Sarah Solovay and John Mueller (New York, 1966), 37. Durkheim briefly discussed the use of common-sense terms as technical terms in sociology. The issue has been thoroughly treated by philosophers of science; a good place to start is Carl Hempel, *The Philosophy of Carl G. Hempel: Studies in Science, Explanation, and Rationality* (Oxford, 2001). For anthropology, see Clifford Geertz, *Local Knowledge* (New York, 1983), ch. 3.

afford us to social phenomena is at least in part defined by their historic or ideological baggage. What would that baggage be in the case of 'ritual' and 'gesture'?

To answer such a question, consider the two terms in relation to two distinctions, that between the sacred and the profane, and between society and the individual. In a rough and ready sort of way, we might say that ritual concerns the social and the sacred, and gesture, the individual and the profane. But the history of these two words in the English language, and within social science as it took shape from the mid-nineteenth century onward, is more complicated.

In one of its main uses, the term 'ritual' has been stable in the English language since at least the sixteenth century, in its reference to religious ceremonials. Ritual in this sense got taken up by the emerging discipline of anthropology as one of its central terms and topics. That centrality derived, I suggest, from the utility of ritual as a concept to demarcate the divide between anthropologists as men of modern science and the irrational 'primitives' whom they studied. The term came to them, obviously, from western religious tradition, but Victorian anthropologists viewed religion as a contracting social domain in the West, one destined, even, to disappear as science progressed. All the more reason, then, to project the concept onto the anthropological object of study, since primitives were imagined to live in a world of irrational religious wonder and fear, sentiments embodied, anthropologists thought, in their elaborate rituals. Hence primitive ritual was a mainstay of anthropological work from the mid-nineteenth to the mid-twentieth century.

At the same time, however, the term 'ritual' was being used metaphorically to refer to secular ceremonies and routines. The *Oxford English Dictionary* gives this delightful quotation from Ralph Waldo Emerson, from 1856: 'politeness is the ritual of society, as prayers are of the church'. And indeed, 'secular ritual' finally became a popular anthropological term, in the 1970s, as Elizabeth Evans describes: 'the typical contemporary definition of ritual is that it can be identified as formal, patterned, and stereotyped public performances, which differs from earlier usages . . . [in which] anthropologists connected ritual with religious practice.'[2] Such definitions, it seems to me, overlap considerably with standard anthropological definitions of culture of the same period; or, to put this another way, once anthropologists

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[2] Elizabeth Evans, 'Ritual', in *Encyclopedia of Cultural Anthropology* (New York, 1996), 1120; see also Sally Moore and Barbara Myerhoff (eds), *Secular Ritual* (Assen, Netherlands, 1977) and John MacAloon (ed.), *Rite, Drama, Festival, Spectacle: Rehearsals Toward a Theory of Cultural Performance* (Philadelphia, 1984).

re-imported ritual from the primitive world to our own secular world, it became possible to see almost anything as a ritual—just as it has always been possible, in modern anthropological thought, to view any aspect of human life as cultural.

As for 'gesture', in English there are interesting late-medieval, early-modern uses of the term that are now obsolete. Gesture (usually in the singular) meant the 'bearing, carriage, deportment' of knights, nobility, and royalty; it also meant the position of the body in acts of prayer (*OED*). One could argue that in these senses the term connoted social distinctions, not individual expression. In other words, the term was appropriate only in reference to certain social classes and domains; it did not indicate a feature of 'everyman's' communicative apparatus. By contrast, the modern sense of the term (from at least the seventeenth century onward) refers to the expressive bodily motions of persons imagined as autonomous individuals. To draw on the *OED* one last time, gesture is 'now [used] only in [a] restricted sense: A movement expressive of thought or feeling'. We can imagine, therefore, that at the time sociology and anthropology were taking shape as modern disciplines, the term 'gesture' had all but lost its earlier, social implications (its class connotations, for example) and was used primarily in reference to features of communication that were considered to pertain to individuals as such. As an apparently secondary or rudimentary form of individual expression, gesture was not of particular interest to social scientists, although some few were interested in what E. B. Tylor called 'the gesture-language', or sign languages, as the origin of human speech.[3]

Gesture never went away, however, as a topic of interest to some scholars, and from the mid-twentieth century it has garnered increasing attention. Partly this attention has come from a renewed interest in pragmatics within anthropology and linguistics, and partly it has come from work in the humanities and the social sciences on the body. Currently, the study of gesture ranges between two extremes. At one end of the spectrum, gesture is narrowly defined as one among several paralinguistic channels, the others being 'gaze shift, holding of a certain posture, interpersonal spacing, self-touch, and bodily symptoms of emotional and physiological states'. That list is drawn from the entry on gesture in the most comprehensive of all social science reference works, the *International Encyclopedia of the Social*

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[3] Edward B. Tylor, *Researches into the Early History of Mankind* (London, 1865); for discussion of Tylor and gesture, see Adam Kendon, 'The Study of Gesture: Some Observations on Its History', *Semiotic Inquiry*, 2 (1982), and Brenda Farnell, *Do You See What I Mean: Plains Indian Sign Talk and the Embodiment of Action* (Austin, 1995), 29–38.

and Behavioral Sciences. The entry in question is entitled 'Gesture in Linguistics'. Significantly, there is no other, more general entry on gesture. Gesture is here defined as 'a semiotic system distinct from language [but also] intimately linked to . . . linguistic performance'. Analysis of gesture then becomes an exercise in parsing the meaningful oppositional units of the hand motions that accompany speech, and relating those gestural units to simultaneously occurring linguistic performance in other channels.[4]

At the other end of the spectrum, the relevant entry in the *Encyclopedia of Cultural Anthropology,* by anthropologist Brenda Farnell, is entitled 'Gesture and Movement'. It is worth quoting the opening paragraph at length:

> Human beings everywhere engage in complex structured systems of bodily actions that are socially acquired and laden with cultural significance. Some structured movement systems, such as the martial arts, sporting activities, idioms of dancing, dramatic arts, ceremonials, and ritual events, involve highly deliberate choreographed movement. Other uses of body movement remain out of . . . focal awareness. . . . Examples include ways of eating, dressing, walking, and sitting as well as modes of physical labor. . . . Also out of focal awareness most of the time are the hand gestures, postures, facial expressions, and spatial orientations that accompany speech.[5]

Here gesture is presented as one among many bodily practices, from posture and dress to 'choreographed' activities such as ceremonies and rituals. I suspect that most of us who are not linguists are working within the framework of this more general approach. It is not so much gesture narrowly defined that interests us, but a range of bodily practices that express social and cultural meanings.

A term like 'bodily practices' immediately suggests another relevant dichotomy in the study of gesture, that of body and mind. The body–mind distinction haunts theoretical discussions of gesture.[6] Related forms of this dichotomy are outer–inner and natural–cultural. As noted above, in the most

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[4] Sotaro Kita, 'Gesture in Linguistics', in *International Encyclopedia of the Social and Behavioral Sciences* (New York, 1999), 6215, 6218. Note, by contrast, that there are four entries pertaining to the body, which together give some idea of the range of humanistic and social scientific interest in the topic: 'Body: Anthropological Aspects', 'Body, Evolution of', 'Body, History of', and 'Body Image and Gender'.

[5] Brenda Farnell, 'Gesture and Movement', in *Encyclopedia of Cultural Anthropology* (New York, 1996), 536.

[6] For an overview, see Farnell, *Do You See What I Mean*, 8–23.

common contemporary usage in English, gesture refers to outer, or bodily, movements that express inner, mental or spiritual states. It's a short step from such a conception to the idea that gestures, of the body, are by definition natural, not cultural. Farnell was careful to announce that gesture and movement must not be considered natural; rather, they are 'socially acquired and laden with cultural significance', and, as such, they vary across space and time. As this remark suggests, current anthropological (and historical, and linguistic) work is attempting to rediscover gesture, movement, and bodily practices as *social* phenomena, rather than purely individual, and even natural, ones. Note, moreover, that as social phenomena, bodily practices cannot be *only* of the body, and their analysis requires us to rethink not only the mind–body distinction, but our very conception of the person or self.

Closely connected to the mind–body dichotomy is another (our fourth!), that between the conscious and the unconscious, or, as Farnell puts it, those actions that are 'deliberate[ly] choreographed' versus those that 'remain out of . . . focal awareness'. In the Cartesian model that so much of the new work on the body has tried to transcend (but often reproduces!), mind alone possesses consciousness, and body is unthinking matter. It is but a short step from those assumptions to the idea that bodily practices are unconsciously enacted. And it is but another short step to argue that *because* bodily practices are unconscious, they should be analytically privileged, either by considering them to be somehow more 'authentic' than self-conscious or verbalized cultural expressions, or by considering them as more secure bases for social solidarity. Either way, this position conjures up notions of enduring social and cultural identity ('deep structures'), shielded in the inner recesses of the body from changeable fashions and from the corrosive effects of rationalization.

To avoid such asumptions, it is well to remember that consciousness and unconsciousness are present as dimensions of *all* thinking and *all* acting. Bodily practices may well be outside 'focal awareness most of the time', as Farnell says, but the adverbial qualifier suggests that humans *can* bring such practices into conscious awareness, as most of us have done when we learned new skills or tried to replace old habits with new ways of speaking, moving, and doing.[7] Moreover, reasoning itself must be grounded in the unconscious dimensions of the particular human language in which it is formulated. At the moment of analysis, native speakers, including scientists and philosophers, cannot focus consciously on grammatical patterns they must make use of to

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[7] See also Farnell, 'Getting Out of the Habitus: An Alternative Model of Dynamically Embodied Social Action', *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, 6 (2000), 408–10.

formulate their most self-conscious, rational arguments.[8] Thus it is mistaken to oppose bodily gestures and practices to thinking, speaking, and reasoning on the grounds that actors engage in the former unconsciously and the latter consciously. All human activities are structured in ways that actors are most of the time not consciously aware of.

To summarize the discussion to this point: I have sketched four dichotomies that often shape analysis of ritual and gesture—sacred/profane, social/individual, mind/body, and conscious/unconscious. None of these dichotomies works very well, whether the task is to define one or the other term (ritual, gesture) by itself, or to distinguish them one from the other. Consider, now, how Erving Goffman navigates such conceptual landmines in his extended treatment of 'the gestural dynamics of modern selfhood'.

Erving Goffman and the study of face-to-face interaction

One of Erving Goffman's most distinguished students and also one of his most astute critics, Emanuel Schegloff, credits Goffman with having 'habilitated a domain of inquiry', the study of 'face-to-face interaction'. He did so, says Schegloff, 'by noticing'.[9] Here I want to take up the issue of what Goffman noticed, how he noticed it, and why what and how he noticed can contribute to our understanding of modern selfhood.

It is easy enough to say what Goffman noticed. He has been widely celebrated as a foundational figure in the development of 'micro-sociology', of social description and theory focused not on large-scale patterns and institutions, but on the minutiae of daily interactions. Goffman wrote about what he called 'the organization of experience . . . and not the organization of society'. Indeed, he said in the same breath that he made 'no claim whatsoever to be talking about the core matters of sociology—social organization and social structure'.[10] Rather, he focused on the interactions of individuals at moments

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[8] The argument was succinctly put in a brief essay by Edward Sapir: 'An Orthodox Psychology', *Freeman*, 5 (1922), 619. Sapir was developing a fundamental theme of the anthropology of his teacher, Franz Boas, who early on had sketched the importance of people's unconscious cultural and grammatical premises; see Boas, 'Introduction', *Handbook of American Indian Language, Part I* (Washington DC, 1911), 63–9, and George Stocking, 'The Basic Assumptions of Boasian Anthropology', in Stocking (ed.), *The Shaping of American Anthropology, 1883–1911: A Franz Boas Reader* (New York, 1974), 7–9.

[9] Emanuel Schegloff, 'Goffman and the Analysis of Conversation', in Paul Drew and Anthony Wootton (eds), *Erving Goffman: Exploring the Interaction Order* (Boston, 1998), 89–90.

[10] Erving Goffman, *Frame Analysis: An Essay on the Organization of Experience* (Cambridge, Mass., 1974), 13.

when they were *not* directly engaged with the kinds of institutions that sociologists, and probably the natives themselves, would call structures and organizations. Even when he noticed and described individuals interacting in scenes that were set within such institutions (most famously, in 'total institutions' such as prisons and asylums), he focused on interstitial or back-stage spaces and moments. Goffman's primal scenes are often set in public spaces like streets, sidewalks, hallways, lobbies, and parks.

I will give several examples of these interactions and scenes in the remainder of this article. Here I want only to observe that Goffman's penchant for coining idiosyncratic and provocative terms—terms often taken from the natives, but taken up by Goffman for his own analytic purposes—is understandable, given his attempt to carve a field of analysis out of aspects of social life that mainstream sociology was not given to notice, much less 'theorize'.[11] Goffman used terms like 'focused and unfocused interactions', 'ecological huddles', 'encounters', 'gatherings', 'rules of irrelevance', and the verb 'to disattend', to make his readers attend to the intricate structuring of apparently uninstitutionalized or informal social exchanges.[12] He used other terms (like 'face', 'line', and 'unit') to discuss aspects of personhood that he felt were not well treated by the standard sociological terminology of status and role.

Underlying his approach to interaction are two basic ideas. From George Herbert Mead, Goffman took the 'principle' of the social construction of self: 'What the individual is for himself is not something that he invented. It is what his significant others have come to see he should be, what they have come to treat him as being, and what, in consequence, he must treat himself as being if he is to deal with their dealings with him.'[13] The last phrase, in particular—'to deal with their dealings with him'—points to an idea that recurs throughout Goffman's writing. It is a specific kind of reflexivity that interests Goffman: not meditation on the essence of an inner self, but attention to the ways others are attending to self, and simultaneous strategic attention to the self one wishes to present to those others. Goffman once

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[11] For a compact manifesto, see Erving Goffman, 'The Neglected Situation', *American Anthropologist* 66, Part II, Special Issue (1964), 133–6; for further discussion, see Adam Kendon, 'Goffman's Approach to Face-to-Face Interaction', and Anthony Giddens, 'Goffman as a Systematic Social Theorist', both in Drew and Wootton (eds) *Exploring the Interaction Order*, 14–21 and 250–2.

[12] On Goffman's use of such terms, see Randall Collins, 'Theoretical Continuities in Goffman's Work', in Drew and Wootton, *Exploring the Interaction Order*, 173.

[13] Erving Goffman, *Relations in Public: Microstudies of the Public Order* (New York, 1971), 279.

termed this 'the infinite regress of mutual consideration'.[14] Notice that such acts of 'monitoring' (another term Goffman uses) occur fleetingly, and can become objects of focal awareness at some moments, but can remain outside awareness at others.

The second idea that is fundamental in Goffman's sociology comes from Emile Durkheim, and it concerns the sacredness of the self as a social production. Mundane social interactions are ritualistic precisely because every encounter between selves brings two sacred entities into contact and potentially into conflict. 'Such ceremonial activity,' Goffman writes, 'is perhaps most clearly seen in the little salutations, compliments, and apologies which punctuate social intercourse, and may be referred to as ''status rituals'' or ''interpersonal rituals''.'[15] Here we have the conceptual space where the terms 'ritual' and 'gesture' meet. If the self is a sacred entity in modern society (as Durkheim thought it was), then it is not surprising to find it hedged about with ritual, albeit 'secular ritual'.[16] Nor, also, is it surprising that the tiny gestures that help constitute interpersonal interactions can be treated conceptually as ritual acts.

Combining as it does these elements of Mead and Durkheim, Goffman's work treats interaction as a semiotic process. Interaction is not merely behaviour, nor can it be merely described without attention to its meaningful constitution. Moreover, the tiniest gestures within the interactional stream can be shown, from this perspective, to be profoundly significant for the social construction of actors as selves or persons—if only the observer take note of them. How is it, then, that Goffman was able to put himself into position to notice what was meaningful about the most trivial of interpersonal acts and gestures?

To take up the question of how Goffman noticed, consider one of the enduring criticisms of Goffman, which concerns the unorthodox nature of his data, or its downright unreliability. Those who celebrate him recognize nonetheless the problem. Thus, Anthony Giddens: 'In [Goffman's] writings, observations drawn from social research jostle with illustrations derived from fictional literature, and with casual assertions made with very little apparent empirical backing at all'.[17] Another admirer, Robin Williams, notes that 'the

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[14] Erving Goffman, *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity* (Englewood Cliffs, 1963), 18.

[15] Errving Goffman, 'The Nature of Deference and Demeanor', repr. in Goffman, *Interaction Ritual: Essays on Face-to-Face Behavior* (Garden City, NY, 1967), 57.

[16] See Collins, 'Theoretical Continuities', 44–50, and *Interaction Ritual Chains* (Princeton, 2004), 17.

[17] Giddens, 'Goffman as a Systematic Social Theorist', 250

most notorious' of the materials Goffman 'pressed into service as data' are 'made-up data—imaginary examples of interaction and speech which are then dealt with by the conceptual scheme . . . with conspicuous success'.[18]

But in the hands of critics whose first purpose is not to celebrate Goffman, his reliance on those 'made-up data' poses a serious challenge to his reputation as the master of micro-sociological analysis. The case is elegantly argued by Schegloff. 'One has the sense', writes Schegloff of Goffman, that

> his work is densely empirical. But really it is not. There are many observations, . . . but one always suspects that the observations are drawn from a much more densely empirical work elsewhere. For example, he refers intermittently to his field work in Shetland Isle, reported in his dissertation (1953); surely that is the densely empirical ethnography elsewhere drawn on. But it is not. It has much the same texture . . . as his later corpus. Nor is the field work in St Elizabeth's hospital anywhere written up in dense detail . . . . So how do we readers come to treat the work as so empirical?

The answer, Schegloff explains, is Goffman's mastery of the art of 'sociology by epitome':

> His observations achieve their sense of typicality . . . by using but . . . a detail or two, to indicate the scene which we as readers are to call up from memory, personal experience, or imagination. If he succeeds, that is, if *we* succeed in calling such a scene to mind, our very ability to do so from his detail or two is 'proof' of its typicality . . . .
> If he, and we, should fail, not much is lost. Any 'case' is likely to be no more than a sentence or two . . . [and] anyway, there are lots of other cases in point, [newspaper] clippings, instances, illustrations. It is both the plethora of cases, and our getting access to much more 'detail' than he ever mentions when we bring to mind the scenes he ordered up by his typifying detail, that provide Goffman's work with its sense of being chock full of detail.[19]

Schegloff's critique provides a strategic opening for a discussion of Goffman's methods. There are places in Goffman's works where he lays out description

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[18] Robin Williams, 'Understanding Goffman's Methods', in Drew and Wootton (eds) *Exploring the Interaction Order*, 72.

[19] Schegloff, 'Goffman and the Analysis of Conversation', 101–2. The title of Goffman's unpublished dissertation is 'Communication in an Island Community', University of Chicago, 1953.

and analysis of actions that we can call 'gestures' in the narrow sense of the term. Consider the following description of a set of gestures that Goffman observed during fieldwork in a hospital:

> At Central Hospital [pseudonym] I have observed an otherwise well-demeaned (albeit mute) youth walking down the ward halls with a reasonably thoughtful look on his face and two pipes in his mouth; another conducted himself with similar nicety while chewing toothpaste; another, with soap on his shaved head; another, while smilingly walking backwards with a neatly folded towel on her head; another, with a ball of paper screwed into his right eye as a monocle; another, with a foot-long strip of woven newspaper dangling from his pocket.[20]

Such actions must have been closely observed by Goffman himself, and the list might well have come directly from his field notes. Goffman interprets these actions, in the context of this mental hospital, as signs of resistance on the part of patients, who refuse (through such gestures) to recognize the sanity of the institution itself, and who reject its definition of their own lack of sanity. This is exactly the sort of interpretation we might expect the study of minute gestures to yield.

But as Schegloff argues, such passages are surprisingly rare in Goffman's work. Rather, what the reader most often finds are typifying vignettes, imagined and written up by different kinds of authors (novelists, journalists, autobiographers, social scientists) and which cannot be precisely linked to specific, real-world events; consider the following example, taken almost at random, from *Stigma*. Goffman has drawn an analytic distinction between the 'visibility' of a stigma and its 'obtrusiveness', and he calls up an illustration:

> At a business meeting a participant in a wheelchair is certainly seen to be in a wheelchair, but around the conference table his failing can become relatively easy to disattend. On the other hand, a participant with a speech impediment, who in many ways is much less handicapped than someone in a wheelchair, can hardly open his mouth without destroying any unconcern that may have arisen concerning his failing, and he will continue to introduce uneasiness each time thereafter that he speaks.[21]

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[20] Erving Goffman, *Behavior in Public Places: Notes on the Social Organization of Gatherings* (New York, 1963), 224.

[21] Goffman, *Stigma*, 49.

The example is so acute that it may make us squirm. But it is unplaced. What business meeting, where and when, populated by which individuals, observed by whom, and recorded as evidence in what manner and what medium? Goffman rarely provides answers to such questions.

Of course, there is a good reason why he doesn't have to. Goffman is a native and so are we; or, more precisely, we are Goffman's natives and he is one of us. Writing about the kind of society in which, he apparently assumes, his readers live, he can further assume that his readers will know what he's talking about. Moreover, the knowledge of minute gestures that Goffman and his readers share is an embodied knowledge. As one often finds when reading great writers, there is a supremely intelligent author or persona speaking to us from Goffman's essays and books, but this is an intelligence attached to a body (and here I am deliberately reproducing rather than trying to escape the mind–body dichotomy) and making use of its own embodied experiences to construct sociological theory.

Some support for this sort of reading is provided by Goffman himself, in a 1974 talk he gave 'on fieldwork', a talk not meant for publication but published posthumously with the permission of Goffman's widow. Goffman sketches a fairly standard description of 'participant observation' as a research technique, but notice his emphasis on what he calls 'bodily response'. In participant-observation, Goffman says, one obtains data

> by subjecting yourself, your own body and your own personality, and your own social situation, to the set of contingencies that play upon a set of individuals, so that you can physically and ecologically penetrate their circle of response to their social situation . . . . So that you are close to them while they are responding to what life does to them. I feel that the way this is done is to not, of course, just listen to what they talk about, but to pick up on their minor grunts and groans . . . . You try to accept all of the desirable and undesirable things that are a feature of their life. That 'tunes your body up' and with your 'tuned-up' body and with the ecological right to be close to them (which you've obtained by one sneaky means or another), you are in a position to note their gestural, visual, bodily response to what's going on around them and you're empathetic enough— because you've been taking the same crap they've been taking—to sense what it is that they're responding to. To me, that's the core of observation.[22]

[22] Erving Goffman, 'On Fieldwork', *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, 18 (1989), 125–6.

There are several things to say about this. There is the emphasis on the ecology of human interaction, by which Goffman means socially constructed spatial arrangements—arrangements among interacting persons based on, and expressive of, social roles, cultural assumptions, and moral claims (for example, who has the right to approach, or to speak to, whom). There is the combination of gradually acquired bodily knowledge (the 'tuned-up' body) and empathy. Bodily knowledge by itself cannot yield 'observation', but it opens up the possibility for empathetic description.

As Goffman tells us later in the talk, description takes initial form in field notes. He exhorts note-takers *not* to emulate Hemingway. 'The worst possible thing you can do', Goffman says, is to write field notes in 'defensible prose'. Rather, 'write . . . as lushly as you can, as loosely as you can, as long as you can put yourself into it, where you say, "I felt that" '. To do so, Goffman explains, is not 'unscientific' at all. On the contrary, it is 'part of the self-discipline' of fieldwork. And it creates a rich 'matrix' of data that 'later on' will allow the researcher to make properly sociological or scientific arguments.[23]

Goffman also discusses field tactics—what fieldworkers should do to position themselves socially in the world to be studied, how to cut themselves off from their familiar world, and how to take field notes unobtrusively. In all this, there is knowledge-making that has more and less self-conscious aspects and that combines bodily, emotional, and rational-verbal learning. Observation, in short, is hardly the dryly empirical visual-rational practice of positivist science (or, perhaps, of the post-structuralist caricature of science). Rather, it is a multi-dimensional, multi-sensory moral activity.[24]

Goffman writes sociology not only with a heightened awareness of his natives' embodied knowledge, but with an awareness of the native model of persons who 'have', or possess, bodies. The native model of embodiment in the modern western world is both Cartesian and Lockean. Not only is a mind–body split presupposed, with mind understood as substance-less thought, and body, thought-less substance; it is also understood that an individual owns his or her body and that a mind operates or controls it. This is evident in Locke's labour theory of value, as expounded in the chapter on property in his *Second Treatise of Government* (1690). The philosopher C. B. Macpherson called this 'possessive individualism', a term that has been

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[23] Goffman, 'On Fieldwork', 131; note that Hemingway is an author Goffman drew on for ethnographic examples, in *Interaction Ritual*, 182, 203–7.

[24] Richard Handler, *Critics Against Culture: Anthropological Observers of Mass Society* (Madison, 2005), 20–1.

taken up to refer to modern ideology, in which the self not only owns its body and other property but is defined in terms of such ownership.[25]

Goffman does not challenge the native model on philosophical grounds. Rather, he runs with it. He incorporates (as it were) the native model into his analytic model. In Goffman's works, some of the implications of a model that most of his natives presuppose are brought into focal awareness in such a way that the familiar becomes strange indeed. In his analyses of 'strategic interactions', which make extended use of game theory, Goffman often writes about the elementary care actors must take of their bodies. In Kafka-esque prose, Goffman tells us that bodies 'splatter' when they fall too far, that bodies are 'subject to "falls, hits, poisons, cuts, shots, crushing, drowning, burning, disease, suffocation, and electrocution"'.[26]

The weirdness of our proprietary relationship to our bodies is made even more evident in Goffman's discussion of the individual as a 'vehicular unit', in the first chapter of *Relations in Public*. As in much of his work, Goffman is here concerned to specify the analytically separable aspects of personhood that cannot be captured by the standard sociological treatment of status and role. To do so, he distinguishes between the individual as a vehicular unit and as a 'participation unit', in order to examine the fact that individuals can simultaneously participate in conversations (governed by one set of rules of order) and negotiate locomotion in public spaces (governed by another set of rules). In the discussion of vehicular units, Goffman is concerned with traffic rules and the 'techniques that pedestrians employ . . . to avoid bumping into one another'.[27]

A vehicular unit, Goffman explains, 'is a shell of some kind controlled (usually from within) by a human pilot or navigator'. Vehicular units vary

> according to the thickness of their skins. There are ships, submarines, trains, and armored cars, all of which have thick skins, being guided by men who are well hidden and in some ways well protected. There are buggies, open cars, sedan chairs, rickshaws, bicycles, and sporting devices such as skis, surfboards, toboggans, kayaks, skates, and skateboards, which leave the navigator relatively

[25] C. B. Macpherson, *The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism: Hobbes to Locke* (Oxford, 1962).

[26] Goffman, *Interaction Ritual*, 167; for similar terms, see Goffman, *Relations in Public*, 254. For comments on Goffman's Kafkaesque prose, see Marshal Berman, 'Relations in Public', *New York Times Book Review* (27 February 1972). For a critique of Goffman for failing to transcend the western mind–body split, see Chris Shilling, *The Body and Social Theory* (London, 2003 edn.), 77–8.

[27] Goffman, *Relations in Public*, 6.

> exposed . . . . Viewed in this perspective, the individual himself. . .
> can be considered a pilot encased in a soft and exposing shell,
> namely his clothes and skin.[28]

The concept of a vehicular unit allows Goffman to consider persons as the
drivers or pilots of their own bodies. Just as a car or a ship is a physical body
with an intelligent pilot inside, so the person in social traffic, in this vision of
the world, is a moving body piloted by a mind. Goffman goes on to discuss the
interaction of hard-shelled and soft-shelled vehicular units, that is, the inter-
action of pedestrians and drivers on city streets, pavements, and crossings.
The fact that both kinds of vehicular units are subject to an integrated set of
traffic rules (beyond the rules that drivers must learn when they obtain their
driving licence) might lead us to speculate (as Goffman explicitly does not) on
the way the modern culture of the automobile reproduces our mind–body
distinction. The ubiquity of the automobile has made it commonplace to
observe that citizens of consumer societies prefer private to public transport.
What is rarely mentioned is that a private vehicle enclosing an individual pilot
makes intuitive sense to people who implicitly understand their relationship
to their own bodies in analogous terms.

So, Goffman exploits his own and his native readers' embodied knowledge,
both explicitly and intuitively, to fashion a sociology in which the familiar
world we usually 'disattend' comes to seem stranger and stranger as Goffman
makes us aware of it.[29] Moreover, Goffman quite purposefully chose his
subjects (in the anthropologist's sense of 'informants' or 'consultants') for
their ability to shed weird light on the familiar, an ability linked to their often
marginal positions in society. Hence the rogues' gallery of gamblers, spies,
criminals, and deviants who populate his books—a 'lumpen-bourgeoisie', as
one commentator terms them.[30] Goffman explains his strategy in a long
footnote in an essay on 'Normal Appearances':

> The important thing about criminals—and other social desper-
> adoes such as children, comics, saboteurs, and the certified insane

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[28] Ibid., 6–7.

[29] On Goffman's ability to make the ordinary strange, see Randall Collins, 'Erving Goffman
and the Development of Modern Social Theory', and John Lofland, 'Early Goffman: Style,
Structure, Substance, Soul', both in Jason Ditton (ed.) *The View From Goffman* (London,
1980), 170–2, 24–8; Geoffrey Nunberg, 'The Theatricality of Everyday Life', *New York
Times Book Review* (May 10, 1981); Giddens, 'Goffman as Systematic Social Theorist',
254.

[30] George Gonos, 'The Class Position of Goffman's Sociology: Social Origins of an
American Structuralism', in Ditton (ed.) *View from Goffman*, 136.

> —is not what they do or why they do it . . . . [Nor is] the importance
> of these strays . . . [to be found] in the cue they provide as to what, in
> our heart of hearts, we do also, but rather in the contrastive light
> their situation throws on what, in doing what we do, we are doing. A
> radical ethnography must take ordinary persons doing ordinary
> things as the central issue.[31]

Studying social desperadoes can make for a radical ethnography of 'ordinary
persons doing ordinary things' because those desperadoes themselves have
studied the way the established order is put together, in order to subvert it; or
because their blunders reveal its hidden outlines precisely at the points they
run afoul of it; or because ordinary persons' reluctance to interact with des-
peradoes, and the discomfort they display when they cannot avoid such
interactions, are similarly revealing. It is this last kind of revelation that is
central to Goffman's *Stigma*, to which I now turn for an extended example
of what, I think, Goffman contributes to our understanding of modern
selfhood.

Goffman's *Stigma*

Stigma is a startling, morally engaged critique of the concept of the 'normal' in
contemporary society. It is tempting to say that *Stigma* was 'ahead of its time'.
Published in 1963, it preceded by at least two decades, and in some ways
'scooped', the works on nationalism, identity groups, and, later, 'whiteness'
that were central in cultural and historical studies in the 1980s and 1990s.[32]
Stigma was also, we might say, marooned ahead of its time: it never became a
key reference of the newer scholarship.

   Stigma concerns the relationship between people who are stigmatized and
those who are normal. It is 'specifically concerned', Goffman tells us, with
'moments when stigmatized and normal are . . . in one another's immediate
physical presence'.[33] As Goffman's analysis shows, such moments bring into
stark relief some central features of modern personhood which we usually
ignore. Let me open a parenthesis here to sketch a basic model of modern
personhood, or individualism, one that *Stigma* presupposes and enriches.

   The model is taken from *Democracy in America*, in which Tocqueville
develops a theory of modern, mass society, which he called democracy, by

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[31] Goffman, *Relations in Public*, 260.

[32] On these topics, the paradigmatic works of the period are Benedict Anderson, *Imagined
Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London, 1983) and
David Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working
Class* (London, 1991).

[33] Goffman, *Stigma*, 12.

comparing it to European feudalism, a type of society he called aristocracy. An aristocracy is structured as a hierarchy, the differing ranks of which define the people within them as well as the types of social interaction that can occur between them and people of other ranks. As Tocqueville asserts, people differ in an aristocracy—differ not in the way we imagine difference today, as differences of personality or style that each fundamentally similar person has the right to develop. Rather, people at different levels of an aristocratic hierarchy differ fundamentally—they are not all the same kind of creature. In a democracy, anyone can be a president or a prime minister (so the myth has it), but in an aristocracy, peasants do not have the stuff of kings. 'Among aristocratic nations', says Tocqueville, 'men [of different ranks] are astonishingly unlike each other', but 'in democracies . . . all men are alike and do things pretty nearly alike'.[34]

Now, fill in the details of this schematic model with materials from Goffman's ethnography of the stigmatized. First, notice how methodologically effective is Goffman's micro-sociology—his focus on face-to-face encounters in anonymous public settings—for revealing the implications of Tocqueville's model. The study of interacting individuals, or units, as such, and without reference to statuses and roles attached to larger institutional structures, allows Goffman to specify features of personhood that macro-sociology (including that of Tocqueville) overlooks. Tocqueville could see what was new, and strange, about a society constructed horizontally out of units defined as equal. He called this individualism. But he did not, for the most part, ask how people within such societies define individuals; he did not, that is, ask about the native model of personhood.

And that is precisely what Goffman does. He *noticed* the gestural discomfort that normals and stigmatized enact when they interact. So acute is this discomfort during such 'mixed contacts', as Goffman calls them, that participants cannot focus on the business at hand ('ordinary persons doing ordinary things') but find themselves drawn into a ritual negotiation of personhood. Such negotiations are necessary because a stigmatized person is not a complete person, a complete interactional unit. Or, more bluntly, as Goffman phrases it, 'we believe the person with a stigma is not quite human'.[35] And in the universe of modern individualism, a world of like and equal persons, there are no explicit rules (at least, none the natives can define as 'fair') for dealing with incomplete, partial, or lesser persons.

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[34] Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, trans. Henry Reeve (New York, 1955), vol. 2, 239.

[35] Goffman, *Stigma*, 12, 5.

A central feature of all this is that normals and stigmatized share the same model of personhood. From this fact follows the mutual discomfort of mixed contacts. Stigmatized persons approach every mixed encounter not knowing whether they will be received as the whole, normal person they consider themselves, inwardly, to be, or as a lesser, incomplete person deserving of contempt, pity, or no ritual notice at all. And normals, similarly, do not know whether they should ignore the stigmatized person's stigma or recognize and make allowance for it. Worse, both parties know the other has such doubts, and, as Goffman so often says, both know that the other knows it. What follows, then, is 'one of the primal scenes of sociology', scenes of 'anxious unanchored interaction'.[36]

Stigma contains many typifying examples of mixed contacts, examples of the sort that make a sympathetic reader wince. As noted, these examples do not necessarily contain the tiny gestural details that the term 'microsociological analysis' would seem to require; rather, they speak to the reader's moral sensibilities (sensibilities which may rely as much on embodied knowledge of those gestural details as on verbally formulated rules). And given Goffman's interest in the self as a moral phenomenon, it is not surprising that *Stigma* also surveys the identity politics that follows from stigmatized persons' struggle to cope with their marked status. Goffman's account is grounded in a categorization of three kinds of stigma: those based on 'abominations of the body', on 'blemishes of individual character' (illustrated in his work by criminals, prisoners, homosexuals, and the mentally ill), and on 'race, nation, and religions'. Significantly, however, people stigmatized in these different ways produce similar identity politics, since at base, they all face the same problem, that of incomplete personhood. And, as noted above, they all share the same model of what a complete person is, and, more than that, of society as a horizontal association of equal persons. As Goffman remarks, it is theoretically possible for the stigmatized to withdraw into a separate culture based on other definitions of the human and the normal, as 'celebrated in exemplary tales about Mennonites, Gypsies, shameless scoundrels, and very orthodox Jews'. But Goffman also thought (as did Tocqueville) that in modern society, 'separate systems of honor . . . [are] on the decline'.[37]

The analysis of identity politics presented in *Stigma* follows (perhaps with no explicit debt) Tocqueville's argument about the centrality of associations in democracy, and it also prefigures the model of nationalism that Benedict

[36] Ibid., 13, 18.
[37] Ibid., 4–5.

Anderson made famous two decades later. The stigmatized, Goffman observed, organize themselves in a number of ways, from 'huddle-together self-help clubs', to 'residential clubs', to 'national associations', to 'mutual-claims networks', and finally, in 'urban milieux' as neighbourhoods or districts. Such groups are more or less organized and institutionalized, but 'no matter how small and how badly off', they are 'literarily' represented in newsletters, magazines, books, and even movies, and publicly represented by leaders.[38]

Leaders mediate between the stigmatized group to which they belong and the wider society. They also articulate an ideology of authenticity—'recipes of being', as Goffman calls them—to define the essential identity of group members. These group 'spokesmen . . . claim that the individual's real group, the one to which he *naturally* belongs', is the stigmatized group, not the wider society. At the same time, they push for acceptance and integration vis-à-vis the wider society. If the first claim is political, an assertion about an identity upon which to base a separatist or oppositional stance, the second, Goffman says, is 'psychiatric'. Indeed, it is 'a stance inspired by normals. . . [such that] he who adheres to the advocated line is said to be mature and to have achieved a good personal adjustment'. In this perspective, the stigmatized person is advised to consider himself fully human but not to insist stridently on this, and further, 'by hard work and persistent self-training', to 'fulfill ordinary standards as fully as he can'.[39]

In Goffman's final analysis, which prefigures the later literature on whiteness, this kind of identity politics is a good deal for normal society. The cruel irony is that in mixed contacts, stigmatized, or marked, or non-white persons are given a responsibility to uphold a model of normal personhood that they are never allowed fully to inhabit: 'The more the stigmatized individual deviates from the norm, the more wonderfully he may have to express possession of the standard subjective self if he is to convince others that he possesses it, and the more they may demand that he provide them with a model of what an ordinary person is supposed to feel about himself'.[40]

Is Normal Personhood a Social Universal?

One of the questions that Goffman's work raises is that of the essential nature and location of the self. Some readers construe Goffman as a cynic, but I agree

[38] Ibid., 22–3, 25.
[39] Ibid., 112–13, 115.
[40] Ibid., 116.

with Randall Collins, who argues that Goffman's fundamental stance relies on a Durkheimian conception of morality, and that the selves enacted by human individuals can be referred, analytically, if not in the self-consciousness of the natives, to social values and to symbolic (semiotic) processes.[41] It's true that in Goffman's work, we can find no definitive statement concerning the ultimate location and nature of the self; the best we get is a description of important dimensions of self and their social construction.[42] But the fact that selves are socially constructed does not mean they aren't real. Moreover, as I suggested earlier, Goffman makes continuous use of the native model of embodied selfhood, as he explains in *Stigma*: 'The first point to note about biographies is that we assume that an individual can really have only one of them, this being guaranteed by the laws of physics rather than those of society'.[43]

So, Goffman gives us no model of the relationship of various kinds of deep and surface selves, and of those social constructions to the natives' belief in a unified, embodied self. He does, however, open up a question about a principal tenet of native belief, that the self should be a normal self. I interpret *Stigma* as a moral protest against the hegemony of the normal, but in addition, it makes a claim (in an early footnote in the book) that the idea of the normal is a historically particular phenomenon:

> The notion of a 'normal human being' may have its source in the medical approach to humanity or in the tendency of large-scale bureaucratic organizations, such as the nation state, to treat all members in some respects as equal. Whatever its origins, it seems to provide the basic imagery through which laymen currently conceive of themselves.[44]

This is significant, for if we develop the logic of this suggestion, we may be led to see not only modern individualism, but the foundational duality of modern social theory, the concepts of self and society, as historically particular phenomena which, as such, may not be well suited to serve as universal analytic terms. To put this slightly differently, 'socialization' should not be seen as a process by which society, everywhere and always, moulds normal individuals. To take the obvious example, a hierarchical society such as

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[41] Collins, 'Theoretical Continuities', 43–50; see also Philip Manning, *Erving Goffman and Modern Sociology* (Stanford, 1992), 58–60.

[42] See for example Goffman, *Relations in Public*, 279.

[43] Goffman, *Stigma*, 62.

[44] Ibid., 7.

Tocqueville's aristocracy could not be founded upon a normality deemed suitable for all, since an aristocratic society is constructed out of difference, not sameness.[45]

Goffman's ambiguity on this point should be grist for the mill of intellectual historians. To those who will attempt to place Goffman in historical perspective, I would point out that he occupied, or perhaps colonized, a strategically crucial theoretical space, between the critique of mass society of the 1950s and the celebration of oppositional identities of the 1990s. The mass society theorists took conformity as the problem, and the liberation of the self as the goal. In this view, society was indeed oppressive, but less because of the sociological conception that the self can exist only in relationship to society and social others, than the psychological (and psychoanalytic) conception that society oppressed the self (or the self repressed itself in response to social pressure). Goffman, it seems to me, was not particularly troubled by the social production of selves, nor is his work morally grounded in a notion of an authentic self and its liberation. He is similarly unromantic about the affirmation of collective selves and identities, which may account for why he never became a prominent source for identity theorists of the 1990s.

To place Goffman historically, I would suggest that we need to understand the larger place of anti-foundationalist discourses in modern scientific ideology. For, as I suggested above, Goffman was consistent, in all his writings, in drawing on a Durkheimian understanding of the social construction of morality, and on a Meadian understanding of the social construction of the self. Social constructionism was not invented in the 1990s, although recent proponents sometimes write as though they believe it was. Rather, approaches in the human sciences that have 'taken the symbolic or cultural turn' go back at least to the late nineteenth century, and have existed as a lively although never hegemonic critical strand in social theory.[46] The interesting historical question then becomes one less concerned with social theory as such than with social theory in relation to particular episodes of social criticism: in what ways

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[45] See Handler, *Critics*, 31–4; Goffman does not, however, pursue this idea either in *Stigma* or in other works. His long 1971 essay on 'Normal Appearances' (in *Relations in Public*, 238–333) makes no argument about the cultural specificity of the idea of the normal, and indeed, framed with ethological terms and concepts, it at least implies that concern with normal appearances is a social universal deriving from our biological nature.

[46] For an account of the recapitulation of prior social theory in apparently innovative theoretical works of the past two decades, see Robert Brightman, 'Forget Culture: Replacement, Transcendence, Relexification', *Cultural Anthropology*, 10 (1995), 509–46.

is Goffman's critique of contemporary society, his cynical or unromantic romanticism, we might say,[47] related to various theoretical constructionisms and the morally ambiguous relativisms they entail?

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[47] Compare Clifford Geertz's assessment of Goffman's 'radically unromantic vision of things' to George Gonos' conclusion that Goffman entertained 'a lingering romanticism' whose object was the lumpen-bourgeoisie; Geertz, 'Blurred Genres: The Refiguration of Social Thought', *American Scholar* (Spring, 1980), 177 and Gonos, 'Class Position', 164. On unromantic romanticism, see Handler, *Critics*, 73–95.