

Erving Goffman and Our Times*

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Preparing these reflections on the anniversary of the publication of Erving Goffman's *Presentation of Self*—appreciative remarks of a reader and teacher of Goffman, not a scholar, I found it difficult to bring myself back to a time and a world before “Goffman,” before “role-distance,” “Where the Action Is,” “face-work,” indeed, before the “presentation of self” was an idea with a great big career. 1959 was also a time before “entertainment conquered reality,” to steal Neal Gabler's phrase (1998), which means when everything in America from politics and religion to sex and consumption had been touched by the brush of Showbiz and the culture of celebrity. In a word, before Goffman—BG—Americans had not yet become conscious of our own theatricality and our very own penchant for drama and drama queens and kings. I am tempted to think that *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* not only brought something new into sociology, but that it entered our world when we were on the brink of discovering the singular role of *performance* in our culture; a time when drama and acting would become part of our everyday lives, drama as habitual experience, as Raymond Williams has called it (1989, pp. 3-5).

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Before Goffman was also a time before “culture” and “identity” came sweeping down on us, marking out the social terrain that we’ve come to recognize as our own. In each of these senses, “our times”—the recognizable place where we do our work, teacher our classes, read and write our sociological treatises—has been in the making for more than a half century and Goffman’s work had something important to do with it. But what? and how best to describe it?

Thinking back on Goffman and our times brought me back to 1968 and The New School in New York where, as new graduate students in a seminar on sociological theory, two little books were very much on our young minds: Berger and Luckmann’s *The Social Construction of Reality* and Goffman’s *Presentation of Self*... We read these closely along with Alfred Schutz’s *Collected Papers*. But, to be honest, I don’t think that the ideas and images contained in these books had an immediate impact. That came later, I suspect, when we came to see that what he described—at a seeming remove from a world of wars and sex and politics (a world that was *very much* on our minds at the time)—was actually a statement, a *critique* really, about that world and ourselves, a critique about the meaning of things and where to go looking for it.

Back then, in the decades when we were taking up our lives in sociology, *The Presentation of Self*... wasn’t just fun to read and clever to teach, it offered us both a *theory of social reality* and an *ethos*, one that resonated with our own somewhat disorderly, critical, and irreverent dispositions about everything from sociology (which we loved and hated, and maybe still do, to this day) to institutions of state, war, and religion. Many of us were never comfortable in the social attire we wore in public life (those front regions), so Goffman made an awful lot of sense to us. And his irreverence

gave us pleasure.

As far as what he wrote, Goffman's *Presentation of Self...* was clearly sociology in a different key, something decidedly new, a new version of the social reality we were committed to studying:

the view that human behavior has an expressive element that communicates a sense of reality and the self;

that *social actors* (a word that preceded Goffman's dramaturgy) knowingly and skillfully put on performances and that, in doing so, they are more or less aware of the effect of these performances on others and on situations;

that the important thing is what people *do* and *say* in each other's presence;

that *as sociologists* we should attend to these sites of doing and saying with great care, because they will open up to us the nature of social reality—something spoken, enacted, done, exchanged in the mundane interactions of everyday life.

(These arguments would be formulated best, perhaps, in "The Interaction Order," Goffman's 1982 Presidential Address, which I'll return to shortly.)

Some commentators have said that it was Goffman's analogy of the stage that was important for understanding his impact. But, dramaturgy did not begin with Goffman (Kenneth Burke's dramatism and Victor Turner's social dramas also stand out as vital articulations of this theory). However, Goffman took the analogy of the theater very far indeed with his elaborations of impression management, the back- and front-stage regions of performances, his claim that we play roles in and out of character, that "one's face is a sacred thing" (1967a, p. 19), requiring ritual to sustain it, that emotions correspond to

various ritual moves and ritual stages, that the normal, spontaneous, flowing interactions in everyday life when we are “engrossed,” presume a great deal of perceptiveness and social skill (like *actors* have), and, finally, his claim that the “proper study of interaction” (Goffman’s playful allusion to Alexander Pope) is *really* about the formal *relations* between actors themselves—the lines they draw, the roles they insist on, the signs they exchange, the distances between them, what they make of each other—and “not the individual and his psychology” (1967a, p. 2); the proper study of interaction is *not* the individuals who make up this or that transactional moment, “but rather the syntactical relations among the acts of different persons mutually present to one another” (1967a, p. 2). Those last, were his precise words in his 1967 essay, “On Face Work).

This final point is, I think, of singular importance in Goffman’s appeal to many of us. I would even call it something more, a deeply personal and emotional *attraction* to his work, one that stands in stark contrast—affectively speaking—to many of the prevailing pieties of sociological discourse then and now—a serious discourse, weighed down by its belief in itself, its enterprise, its universal value-as-knowledge. By contrast, Goffman’s modest claims about the “proper” study of interaction (in a work designed to show us our many improprieties), is a psychology that is decidedly anti-psychological and, certainly, anti-psychiatric; in fact, it is anti- a number of things (a point I will return to). It disavows (mocks, really) anything that has claims to universal importance. Goffman’s is a psychology that, in his words, is “stripped and cramped to suit the sociological study of conversation, track meets, banquets, jury trials, and street loitering” (1967a, p. 3; cf. 44-45). It’s a view of society as a domain of many kinds of players involved in any number of serious and trivial games: “ritual games of having a self” (Goffman 1962); the

encounters of couples dancing, men boxing, members of a jury deliberating (Goffman 1961); whether exchanges of individuals or teams, whether social actors in conflict or in love, our most contrived or most sincere selves are, at most and at best, grasped as “interactants,” who have been *taught* (and taught ourselves) to feel and to display (to others and ourselves) the pride, poise, or dignity we possess; persons with feelings, say, are *interactants* who make *claims* to these feelings and claims to be the person implicated by such deep and sincere feelings. And as Goffman shows us in one of his disturbing essays about mental symptoms, “psychotic behavior is, in many instances, what might be called situational impropriety,” examples of public misconduct, “a defect,” he writes, “not in information transmission or interpersonal relating, but in the decorum and demeanor that regulate face-to-face association” (p. 148 from *Interaction Ritual*). Thinking back now, I am certain that this *view of things human* resonated with us as a “truth,” something marking us off from others inside of our sociological home.

Back to the theory: Mental illness occupies a special place in Goffman’s works, also because it offers a supreme case of the *rules* that make up the lexicon of social improprieties—misbehaviors that point us to the rules and not to the behaviors themselves. Mental illness also provides the materials for another claim of Goffman’s: that human beings don’t *express* a nature; they don’t even express some hidden character of what they are. They/we actively fashion, display, make visible what we are. Goffman’s view of mental illness also gave us a way of grasping *identities*: by attending to persons’ “careers,” as he called them, in official reports, in people’s acts and expectations, in something going on among “interactants.” In that closing section of *Presentation of Self...* which some of us have recited like a *mantra* to our students, we

read: the “self does not derive from its possessor, but from the whole scene of his action...this self...as a performed character is a dramatic effect arising diffusely from a scene. . . . In analyzing the self, then, we are drawn from its possessor. From the person, for he and his body merely provide the peg on which something of collaborative manufacture will be hung for a time” (1959, pp. 252-253).

This is a text that achieves many things, among them a critique of some of our deepest beliefs,” as Goffman himself describes them. Similarly, we are given a “sermon” in *Gender Advertisements* (1988) about men and fishes; it’s about “the doctrine of natural expression,” the deep belief in our society that “an object produces signs that are informing about it,” expressions of their/our natures. He offers an alternative account of the notions of “essence” and “character.” Human behaviors are so many “displays”—these displays show us how individuals learn to be objects that have character and for whom such expressions—sighs, winks, eyes brimming with tears, intensity worn on a face—*express* this character; we are individuals for whom such expressions have become “natural.” With the elements of this sermon in hand, we are now armed with materials for examining all “doctrines of expression,” especially those doctrines about the biological substrates of races and sexes; a sociology that allows us to see—in things like photos, films, and advertisements—those “otherwise opaque goings on,” those stagings of the meanings that make up the substance of society (1988, p. 8).

A final word about Goffman’s own thinking about himself as sociologist. I mean, the way he *represented* himself and his work. Here too, there was an *identification* of ourselves and *the world according to Goffman*: in many instances, his own self-presentation was one of modesty, tentativeness, and with generous amounts of self-

deprecating humor, and—also unlike his colleagues and contemporaries) he was a master of understatement.

In the Preface of *Presentation of Self...* we read: “I mean this report to serve as a sort of handbook detailing one sociological perspective from which social life can be studied.” In the final “Presidential Address” (published in 1982, but never presented in public), Goffman is disarmingly direct, reporting his embarrassment in anticipation of this public occasion, his uneasiness, and his uneasiness about his embarrassment.

But whatever his stance—playful or hostile—it was typically a stance that was “out of alignment with sociology” (MacCannell 1982, p. 2). And he saved some of his cruel humor for those he thought were pigeon-holing him, or worse, informing him that he had missed some important point, or had failed to measure up to an intellectual standard, in this case, of phenomenological sociology. “My critics,” he writes of Denzin and Keller, “have paradigms to grind...a broad perspective to defend...and a stilted sense of social reality” (Goffman 1981, p. 68). But, in the presidential address, written in anticipation of a very public and ceremonious occasion—as told by an expert on such ceremonies—one who also knows the opportunities and risks of such events (Read the 1967 essay, “Where the Action Is.”), Goffman’s tone is modest, humorous, and predictably filled with self-deprecating remarks, and with a conclusion designed to draw us in and to make us laugh at ourselves. It is also a restatement that “the proper study of interaction” is, indeed, worthwhile, and worthy of our meticulous attention. Let’s listen to Goffman (1983, p. 17, “The Interaction Order”):

I’m not one to think that so far our claims can be based on magnificent accomplishment. Indeed, I’ve heard it said that we should be glad to trade

what we've so far produced for a few really good conceptual distinctions and a cold beer. But there's nothing in the world we should trade for what we do have: the bent to sustain in regard to all elements of social life a spirit of unfettered, unsponsored inquiry, and the wisdom not to look elsewhere but ourselves and our discipline for this mandate.

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