

## The Long-Term Resonance of Erving Goffman's Observations

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Erving Goffman, the most cited American sociologist of all times<sup>1</sup>, still brings to this day (September 2023) his clarity, style, and wit, on common-sense. By nearly all reckoning, this did not seem at the time he wrote a subject that needed much study. Many of his academic colleagues thought he was wasting his time, and theirs, on something so obvious. 'Everyone knew' what common-sense was. Why bother with the obvious? Personal interaction had only a slightly more respectable pedigree, confined as it was to the backlot studios of sociological inquiry and anthropological field-work. Aside from George Herbert Mead<sup>2</sup> and his student Herbert Blumer<sup>3</sup>, the fact that private life was of great interest to novelists and psychologists did not enhance its prestige among those who sought scientific status for their endeavors. But Goffman was onto something that many of his colleagues neglected, which acquired even more heft in the 21st century than when it appeared in 1956. It turned out that the obvious was actually mysterious, that norms 'taken for granted' could also be taken away. Even then, how people navigate personal interaction was not at all clear, even to themselves. And this despite the fact that, as Goffman discovered, enormous effort is devoted to it. Erving Goffman was the first to identify the dual nature of the norms we live by, being both apparently unquestioned and yet highly problematical.

Mid-century America and other Western societies held freedom in high esteem as an ideal, if not always in practice. Some variance in thought and behavior was recognized as a source of scientific innovation and artistic creativity, and therefore essential for both spiritual and material well-being.<sup>4</sup> England historically and famously had been the home of eccentricity, but the French, the Americans, and even the group-oriented Japanese re-discovered their own historical traditions of quirkiness. The Beat Generation, feeling stifled by stuffy norms of nine-to-five corporate work and white picket-fence suburbia, got the mid-century cultural rebellion going. In offbeat poetry, abstract art, jazz and atonal music, dress, speech, drugs, sex and other behavior, they sought authenticity and new experiences. A mood of restless anticipation rustled the leafy suburbs and college campuses, was picked up by cinéastes of the Nouvelle Vague (Alain Resnais, Jean-luc Godard, François Truffaut, Marcel Carné whose rapturous 1945 celebration of mental illness as a superior form of knowledge in '*Les Enfants du Paradis*' was revived), Hollywood actors (James Dean, Marlon Brando), television shows (*Twilight Zone*,

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<sup>1</sup> <https://journals.sagepub.com/eprint/EINT33ET4GBNIHEBW7FK/full?>

<sup>2</sup> George Herbert Mead, *Mind, Self, and Society*, University of Chicago Press, 1934

<sup>3</sup> *Symbolic interactionism: Perspective and Method*, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1969

<sup>4</sup> <https://kamprint.com/essay/hayek.html>

Ernie Kovacs); and wafted through the big cities and the hinterlands. Normal life was never the same after that. It had been demoted to the status of one of many options.

Erving Goffman arrived on the academic scene from Dauphin, on the Manitoba prairies of Canada, via the remote Shetland Islands offshore of Scotland. A year among the Shetland crofters set him on a lifetime course of keenly observed personal interaction. His timing was perfect. People in mid-century America and elsewhere were eager to learn what made themselves tick. His *'Presentation of Self in Everyday Life'*<sup>5</sup>, examined in exacting yet sympathetic detail how people got through everyday life. Armed with examples drawn from Shetland to Trobriand Islanders, classics of sociology, anthropology, literature, psychology, lonely-hearts letters, and crime reports, Goffman dissected everyday life and re-assembled it as a living, recognizable entity. Like Agatha Christie's Miss Marple, he was a noticer. And as often as not, key clues were 'hidden in plain sight'. Goffman aimed, though, not to catch crooks, but to parse reality.

Almost accidentally, Goffman opened up everyone's little secret, that everyday life *was* in fact problematical, that getting through it required much effort, was beset by anxiety, and that the effort wasn't always successful. It was as if he had some entrée into everyone's private angst, like the Village Voice cartoonist of that era, Jules Feiffer, of whom it was often asked 'How did he know, was he listening through the keyhole, or what?' (This pre-dated mass surveillance.) Somehow Goffman tapped into the collective unconscious of the human race.

As one of his students, Walter Clark, recalled, 'Erving had this ability... to see what people were doing when they didn't know it themselves.... As he said in the beginning of his book *Presentation of Self*, he need produce no proof of what he says, for the reader will recognize the truth from his own experience.'<sup>6</sup> This came perilously close to generating knowledge from revelation, which was neither replicable nor statistically significant. It did not appeal to colleagues anxiously seeking scientific status for their nascent discipline. Clark invoked Rembrandt, who 'might have said, "Here is a paintbrush, now paint what you see." Many of us wondered how he could do it, and many of us tried to do it, but I don't think anyone ever matched him.' Therein lay Goffman's claim to fame, yet also the eagerness of some colleagues to dismiss his work. But he was speaking over their heads to a lay audience, betting that they would come around if enough people of non-academic intelligence saw the merit of what he was doing. He wanted it both ways -- both popular and professional esteem -- and he wanted both on his own terms. Eventually he won grudging respect from colleagues, even before gaining the presidency of the American Sociological Association, at the end of his life in 1982.

The norms we live by are typically unstated and often invisible. How to reveal them? Goffman's method was that of anthropology, participant observation, acting as a member of the tribe and

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<sup>5</sup> [http://www.munmund.net/courses/fall2016/resources/Goffman\\_PresentationOfSelf.pdf](http://www.munmund.net/courses/fall2016/resources/Goffman_PresentationOfSelf.pdf) Edinburgh University Monograph, 1956, Anchor edition 1959

<sup>6</sup> [https://digitalscholarship.unlv.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1012&context=goffman\\_archives](https://digitalscholarship.unlv.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1012&context=goffman_archives)

watching what people do in various situations. It sounds simple, but called for re-inventing his own intuition to tune it to the tribe he sought admission to. He eschewed the then-universal injunction of the social sciences to hold himself aloof from the subjects of study. As he always advised students when asked, such detachment ruined the prospect of finding out what was really going on. To acquire the kind of knowledge he sought, you had to use your own self to get it. It was impossible to ask people what they meant by a gesture of approval or dismissal, why they were pleased or offended by a particular remark, or what they hoped to accomplish by acting humble or haughty. They would likely be unaware themselves of why they acted as they did, and even if aware, disinclined to explain it to an outsider. Just as, when you ask an auto mechanic or a plumber or a movie director how they knew what to do, and the tradesman would very likely not waste time explaining this to someone uninformed of even the rudiments of the trade, so the members of a tribe would not (even if they knew) delve into their own motivations to satisfy a stranger's curiosity. Far less, of course, could animals be expected to explain what would elicit a threat display versus a bid for affection. The method of inquiry has to be matched to the kind of knowledge sought. The kind of knowledge Goffman sought could *only* be obtained by personal experience – by first doing whatever it took to become accepted as a member of the tribe, really feeling a sense of belonging to it, responding to unfolding events as an *insider*, and then observing one's own and others' responses. Thus the standard detachment of a laboratory scientist who affects not to care about the result of an experiment cannot work with human subjects. Per the Hawthorne effect, the experiment itself biases social experiments. Taking this and his own intuition to heart, Goffman's search for a higher order of knowledge steered him toward the methods he adopted.

Others before him had taken on the role of tribal participants to study 'primitive' societies. A few, such as Mayhew<sup>7</sup>, Whyte<sup>8</sup>, and Riis<sup>9</sup>, had used it to study urban street people. But it had rarely if ever been employed to dig into what constitutes *our* (modern Western) common-sense. The term 'primitive' has since disappeared in anthropological discourse and Museum naming. Picasso had used 'primitive' motifs in his artwork, and tribal artifacts later became staples of middle-class home decor. But it was nevertheless unsettling among many in Goffman's circle to equate modern Western societies with 'primitive' ones. Yet this was clearly the subtext of his methods of gathering and analyzing data, and his rigorously class- and ethnicity-neutral mixing of sources. The cries of protest in faculty clubs, 'He's treating us like savages!', though unvoiced, could almost be heard. This of course was music to the ears of students and others who were happy to be classed with savages.

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<sup>7</sup> Henry Mayhew, *London Labour and the London Poor*, <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/55998/55998-h/55998-h.htm> (First edition 1851)

<sup>8</sup> William Foote Whyte, *Street Corner Society*, University of Chicago Press, 1943

<sup>9</sup> Jacob Riis, *How the Other Half Lives*, Scribner's, 1890: <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/45502/45502-h/45502-h.htm>

Even more disconcerting to their elders, and therefore welcome to the young, was uncovering the problematical nature of fitting-in. It wasn't merely not knowing which fork to use when invited to dinner, but the entire range of behavior appropriate to social occasions, encounters with the opposite sex, status-superiors, and so on. What's normal, what's odd? What am I supposed to do, how am I expected to act? This malaise is endemic in democratic societies, as Tocqueville noted of 19th-century America, in contrast to Europe where social class prescribed the right behavior and speech in every situation. Yet it was still surprising how many people turned out to be misfits, either by their own admission or by other people's reckoning. Millions sought advice from Ann Landers, Dear Abby (Abigail van Buren), or the more upscale Miss Manners (Judith Martin). These newspaper columns provided abundant material for Erving Goffman's lectures, and he always had a sheaf of these clippings ready to hand to illustrate the mores, the hidden 'operating system', as we might say today, governing social life. His ironic manner of reading them to an audience made it clear he did not regard them as authorities, but found them a convenient resource for 'making the familiar strange', as Kenneth Burke<sup>10</sup> put it, the better to illuminate them from another perspective.

In *'Presentation of Self'* Goffman treats social encounters as 'performances', perhaps to highlight their intentionally stage-managed character and the fateful consequences of not getting them right. How many and varied are the ways to screw up social interaction!

*'A performer may accidentally convey incapacity, impropriety, or disrespect by momentarily losing muscular control of himself. He may trip, stumble, fall; he may belch, yawn, make a slip of the tongue, scratch himself, or be flatulent; he may accidentally impinge upon the body of another participant.'*<sup>11</sup>

These would be particularly discomfiting where manual dexterity and concentration are required, as in the doctor-patient relationship.

*'Secondly, the performer may act in such a way as to give the impression that he is too much or too little concerned with the interaction. He may stutter, forget his lines, appear nervous, or guilty, or selfconscious; he may give way to inappropriate outbursts of laughter, anger, or other kinds of affect which momentarily incapacitate him as an interactant; he may show too much serious involvement and interest, or too little.'*<sup>12</sup>

These would interrupt the smooth workflow expected of experienced practitioners. Regardless of the nature of the knowledge a professional brings to an encounter (medical, legal, civil engineering, or skilled trades), he is expected to do so with a demeanor carefully calibrated to inspire confidence. Departures such as these induce doubt that the performer is actually competent to do the work at hand, and in extreme cases may even suggest that he is an

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<sup>10</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kenneth\\_Burke](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kenneth_Burke)

<sup>11</sup> *Presentation of Self*, p 34

<sup>12</sup> *Presentation of Self*, p 34

impostor. Thus a high degree of self-control is an essential part of the common-sense of the occasion.

Goffman found in such slip-ups and in violations of norms the key clues to their content, their permissible exceptions, how far they could be stretched, and what sanctions might be applied to offenders. At first, he observed others testing the limits of acceptable behavior. Later he explored settings where violations of norms occurred more often -- mental hospitals, casinos, criminal gangs, and the like. He also tested the limits himself in his own everyday life, a practice carried forward from his days as a boy in small-town Manitoba. This experience probably made him an expert practitioner before he made it into a research method. As his fame grew, so did his tendency to violate the norms of polite society, such as standing too close to people at faculty parties to measure the distance at which they would begin to back away. This too, in addition to his unorthodox and 'unscientific' research methods, did not endear him to fellow faculty members. Ironically this was part of Goffman's own scientific method, as in these moments he did not care what others thought of him. Perhaps he hoped they would appreciate that he too was pursuing a scientific calling, though only a few, such as Neil Smelser<sup>13</sup> navigated the complexities of dealing with Goffman successfully enough to appreciate both the man and his work.

One of the most potentially freighted aspects of common-sense involves sorting out who among strangers is likely to be friendly, neutral, or hostile. As Goffman once posed this problem to his Berkeley class, *'How do you know the person walking toward you is not going to stick a knife in your kidneys?'* This was his way of introducing the subtle cues of dress, facial expression, gait, body language, and other attributes of demeanor that telegraph intention. Children learn very early in life, long before school-age, whom to trust or not. Animals face a similar problem sorting out predators from prey, and rapidly develop their pattern-recognition abilities, else they don't survive. Goffman often used animal-ethology studies to illustrate the use of threat-markers as triggers for the fight-or-flight response. Similarly, submissive gestures, colorful displays, and courtship rituals invite comradeship or intimacy. In the human world, clothes, makeup, grooming, speech, and manners serve a similar purpose. These are all ways of managing the impression we hope to create, and therefore others' expectations of us. The 'news' here is how 'unnaturally' much work is required to maintain appearances that are generally assumed to emerge naturally and without forethought.

This may be another indication of the universality of Goffman's observations, as they suggest an analogy to biological processes like breathing, circulation, and homeostasis that operate without conscious control. These processes too are actually quite complex, require much concealed effort, and generally don't impinge on awareness unless something goes wrong. Perhaps human societies are like organisms, at least in their talent for automatic collaboration and transmission of useful traditions and norms by organizational DNA. But the analogy should not be taken too far, lest volition and consciousness get lost in the shuffle, as the socio-biologists such as E O

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<sup>13</sup> [https://digitalscholarship.unlv.edu/goffman\\_archives/65](https://digitalscholarship.unlv.edu/goffman_archives/65)

Wilson<sup>14</sup> tended to do. There's no place for mindless automatons in Goffman's observations. Departures from norms in human societies, their frequency and variety, suggest a vitality that is missing in mechanistic models of behavior.

Appearances, as we all know, can be deceiving. Someone intent on mayhem would do well to affect a harmless appearance. The lioness seeking an evening meal crouches in the tall grass, concealing her true intention before springing on the hapless gazelle. Human predators likewise disguise what they are really after under a shroud of virtue-signaling and laudable aims; politicians and oligarchs are particularly adept at this. The opportunities for deception are as many and varied as the means for doing so. The rise of social media since Goffman's time has multiplied these exponentially, while depriving users of the cues readily available in person. Before the Internet was even a blip on the horizon, Goffman noted 'the vast expressive equipment that becomes available when persons are in each other's company'.<sup>15</sup>

In his world of face-to-face interaction, social life presented as many opportunities for spotting deception as for practicing it. His close study of 'tells', or unintentional giveaways of a character at variance with the one projected, reveals the many resources available to the attentive observer. He was himself an unskilled poker player, as his poker-playing friends attested: 'If he was dealt as much as a pair of deuces, his hands trembled and his facial expression betrayed excitement', said one. Perhaps his own shortcomings in that endeavor made him particularly sensitive to the high level of skill needed to deceive others.

Maintaining consistent appearances is hard work! People slip-up, and these mistakes, gaffes, and embarrassments make visible the boundaries of acceptable behavior. From the Shetland Island crofters of Goffman's earliest field-work to the most accomplished grifters and con-men of his later research, Goffman was always on the lookout for these clues.

Shetland Islanders sought to maintain their age-old class identities as islanders and as crofters, by never 'putting on airs' like middle-class visitors, and cultivating an attitude of deference toward the gentry. At the same time, they must absorb as 'second-nature' a wide variety of expectations appropriate to different status relationships and occasions:

*'Action is guided and integrated by the rights and obligations pertaining to kinfolk, property-holders, contractees, citizens, friends, guests, and the like, and by standards, such as efficiency, economy, and respect for tradition. In one situation the social orderliness that prevails will be largely determined by one set of norms; in another situation a different set of norms will provide the principal guides for action.'*<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> <https://www.hup.harvard.edu/catalog.php?isbn=9780674002357>

<sup>15</sup> Dissertation, *Communication Conduct in an Island Community*, PhD dissertation, University of Chicago, Dept of Sociology, Dec 1953, p 358

<sup>16</sup> Dissertation, p 344

If an island of 400 souls harbors that degree of complexity, imagine what prevails in an organization of tens of thousands, a city of millions, and among the tens or hundreds of millions comprising a nation. For Goffman, however, all the action is in the immediately observable surroundings. From his boyhood in Manitoba to the tumultuous days of Berkeley circa 1968 and afterward, he studiously avoided politics. He probably considered that he had nothing to learn from politics. Had he cared to devise a theory of large-scale social organization, he might have noticed how crucially dependent large-scale societies are on cooperation within families, small businesses, voluntary organizations, religious groups, professions and trades, and others; that the sinew and fiber of all jurisdictions up to and including an entire nation consists of uncountable myriads of these sub-groups.

The enormous changes in mores, manners, and customs during the 1960s and 1970s could hardly be ignored, though, even by someone as determined to ignore them as Goffman was. In his ideal world, people knew their place; it was his privilege, and he took it as his responsibility, to knock them off-kilter for the sake of experiment and learning. Even in *Asylums*, which posited a view of mental illness as a social construct, he did not fancy the inmates taking over the asylum. Students taking over the Berkeley campus in 1968 must have shocked him as much as it shocked other faculty members. To my young self (I was there), it was only a lark. A few blocks away, I helped 'liberate' the wasteland that we made into 'People's Park'. This seemed like a great land-use improvement, and a valuable service to mankind. The fact that title to it was vested in the University of California, Berkeley, was immaterial to us.<sup>17</sup> The UCB lawyers worried that leaving the Park in students' hands would damage the University's title to the property. So, Governor Reagan was told he had no choice but to launch the tear gas-spraying helicopters -- making the Berkeley campus a domestic simulacrum of Vietnam, with horrible 'optics' as pundits now might say. It was a classic case of initial inattention followed by lawyered-up over-reaction. People's Park returned to its former condition as a wasteland, with the addition of a sign informing passersby that it belonged to the University. In truth it was not a large disturbance as these things go – certainly less so than the violent riots of later years – but the Berkeley faculty had had enough disorder. Rendering the campus uninhabitable with tear gas in effect cancelled an entire semester. They deserted Berkeley in droves, for the greener pastures of the Ivy League. Among them were two I had studied with, Nathan Glazer<sup>18</sup> who decamped to Harvard, and Erving Goffman to Penn.

Universities competed for talented faculty, and rivals were quick to take advantage of Berkeley's troubles to go fishing for big names. Penn offered Goffman a higher salary, the Benjamin Franklin Chair, and a half-time teaching load. Possession of such honors in the citadel of the American Republic undoubtedly appealed to the WASP-envy inculcated in the Manitoba-born boy. Berkeley had become the top Sociology Department in the nation, thanks in large part

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<sup>17</sup> The Berkeley students were one with Allen Ginsberg when he responded to the Chicago Seven judge who tried to disallow a reading of his poem *Howl* on the basis that there was no '*materiality*' to such testimony, '*Oh Your Honor, there is a spirituality to it.*'

<sup>18</sup> <https://sociology.berkeley.edu/nathan-glazer-1957?undefined>

to its Chairman Herbert Blumer, an ex-football player for the Chicago Bruins. Blumer, a born administrator as well as a distinguished sociologist, recruited (1952 - 58) and retained stars like Reinhard Bendix, Kingsley Davis, William Kornhauser, Franz Schurmann, and Erving Goffman – as intellectually diverse and individually distinguished a crew as at role models Chicago and Columbia.

Charles Glock had the misfortune of chairing the Sociology Department during the 1968 fracas. To him belongs the ignominy of losing Erving Goffman, though Glock did his best to match Penn's offer. Discussions went all the way up to the Chancellor and Regents (the fancy titles of Berkeley's higher-level bureaucrats), but faculty colleagues were averse to excusing Goffman from the teaching responsibilities they all bore. Had I had a vote on the matter, I would have agreed, not as a matter of justice, but because Goffman's lively conversation in class could never be replicated in print. In person, his brilliance dazzled and stimulated all students, whether they liked him personally or not. Gary Marx said 'He was the most interesting teacher I have ever had.'<sup>19</sup> Roy Turner: 'It was a real presentation, it was formed.... And then the intensity of the man.... He was charismatic, really.'<sup>20</sup> Richard Daniels: 'He was always ready to explain anything that he said in a lecture or in an interchange that seemed difficult to understand. He did that without condescension, he did that with patience, and with grace!... He was a model lecturer – incisive, clear, engaging.'<sup>21</sup> Arlene Daniels: 'His courses were brilliantly constructed.'<sup>22</sup>

Missing from all the offers and counter-offers made by competing universities was the most important thing; teaching, and the loss to students resulting from a faculty appointment amounting to half a professor. And as is clear from the recollections above, Goffman's most memorable legacy is those encounters, when he was at his uninhibited best. His talent for homing in, like a laser-guided missile, on the point of greatest embarrassment, incongruity, or pain – in short, for saying precisely the *wrong thing* – is unforgettable. For this *shtick* to work, he needed a live audience or an interlocutor. Then, like the Shetland Islanders, he quickly converted his faux pas into a humorous observation, taking the sting out of it, then drew out the contents of the stinger to see why it stung, analyzed the toxin, and refined it into new knowledge of how the world works. This all happened 'on the fly' in his classes. The books and articles merely elaborated those themes in more presentable language.

How strange it seemed to me that excusing a teacher from teaching was considered a reward and a sign of enhanced status – doubly so in Goffman's case because no one was more aware of the extraordinary value of face-to-face encounters. That he apparently valued this status symbol over the real wealth of classroom meetings disappointed me, for that was the key element of Penn's offer that Berkeley could not match. He misjudged the conditions of his own success, driven as it had been by intense engagement with those around him. Setting aside his ethos of

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<sup>19</sup> [https://digitalscholarship.unlv.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1084&context=goffman\\_archives](https://digitalscholarship.unlv.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1084&context=goffman_archives)

<sup>20</sup> [https://digitalscholarship.unlv.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1070&context=goffman\\_archives](https://digitalscholarship.unlv.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1070&context=goffman_archives)

<sup>21</sup> [https://digitalscholarship.unlv.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1014&context=goffman\\_archives](https://digitalscholarship.unlv.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1014&context=goffman_archives)

<sup>22</sup> [https://digitalscholarship.unlv.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1013&context=goffman\\_archives](https://digitalscholarship.unlv.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1013&context=goffman_archives)



participant observation diluted the quality of his subsequent writing, which repeated without adding anything to his earlier mental-illness themes, and fell into the academic style he had previously detested.

A persistent upsetter of established orders, Goffman nevertheless hankered after them. His marriage to Angelica Schuyler Choate, the bluest of New England bluebloods, gave eloquent testimony of his WASP-envy, and made him financially independent as well. He furnished his homes in both Berkeley and Philadelphia in old-America classic -- Chippendale chairs of which he was very proud, and an overall atmosphere that would not have been out-of-place in the best London clubs. It can be inferred that the student disturbances at Berkeley (which to my young self appeared tame) truly disturbed his equilibrium, perhaps evoking the inmates taking over the asylum. And while he would not have mentioned it as a reason for his departure, opting for the more 'rational' economic justification, deep-down it probably was the mainspring of his action. Gary Marx says, 'Apparently Goffman found the 1960s bothersome, especially as the spirit of the age transformed the Berkeley scene. You would think that the rule breaking and acting out should have fascinated him, yet he seemed to be put off by all the hustle and bustle.'<sup>23</sup> John Irwin: 'I believe he also left because he did not like the Berkeley graduate students' heavy involvement in the political activities – the free speech movement and the Viet Nam war protests'.<sup>24</sup>

Goffman's own impromptu social experiments, the modus vivendi of his life, his acquisition of notoriety and academic respectability at the same time, depended on an assumed solidity of large-scale institutional structures, without which his own role would have been unthinkable and unsustainable. The breakdown of social order at Berkeley upset him more than he let on. In reality, he hadn't seen anything yet – far worse was to come, but he was spared that while at Penn, and for the remainder of his life.

Even deeper-down was something neither Goffman nor anyone else would ever mention: Angelica's suicide in 1964. Stopping her Jaguar XKE midway on the Richmond-San Rafael Bridge, she walked to the Marin County end near San Quentin prison (an asylum of criminals) and jumped off. Symbolic interaction, she seemed to be saying, had never claimed a more tragic victim, nor one who deserved more notice than she was accorded. Goffman's getting as far as possible away from those tragic surroundings (the Bridge and the Bay could be seen from his home in the Berkeley hills), and lodging in the heart of the American Republic, was a perfectly understandable response.

Without Angelica, the sole person cited in '*Presentation of Self*' as having made that work possible, the quality of Goffman's research and writing returned to that stellar level only once. That was in '*Strategic Interaction*', a brilliant and elegant exploration of game theory in personal relationships, written under the influence of Thomas Schelling. Schelling, himself the brilliant

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<sup>23</sup> [https://digitalscholarship.unlv.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1084&context=goffman\\_archives](https://digitalscholarship.unlv.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1084&context=goffman_archives)

<sup>24</sup> [https://digitalscholarship.unlv.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1037&context=goffman\\_archives](https://digitalscholarship.unlv.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1037&context=goffman_archives)

author of *'The Strategy of Conflict'*<sup>25</sup>, which is still required reading among diplomats and spies, was so impressed with Goffman that he volunteered 'If there were a Nobel Prize in Sociology, Goffman would certainly get it'. It's interesting that Goffman's sole venture into geopolitical analysis garnered such high praise from a highly respected practitioner of that trade.

While at Berkeley Goffman had made a point of ignoring political themes, at Penn he re-cast feminist themes as framing devices in *'Gender Advertisements'*, a tendentious discussion of stereotypical sex roles in advertising. This was hardly news in 1976, and it smacked of an effort to please a group hyper-sensitive to the slightest slight – right down to the use of Justice Ginsburg's pseudo-scientific term for 'sex'. Goffman could hardly fail to notice by then that sex and race tipped the scales in favor of candidates for graduate admission and faculty appointment. Even as early as 1967, he had remarked to me that the only difference between men and women was that the former 'could write in the snow'. He liked these pithy metaphors, and it took me a while to recall he was an expert skier. This sort of sentiment was in the academic air at the time. A CSLS associate in Criminology, a former San Francisco cop, expressed his opinion to me then that for police work 'it doesn't matter whether you have a cock or a cunt'. Both statements were proffered tentatively, more as provocative rhetoric to 'test the waters' than as assertions to be taken seriously. I thought both statements were nonsense; subsequent developments like the epidemic of 'gender dysphoria' and genital mutilation surgery have shown the destructive consequences of such sexual reductionism. In any case, Goffman's venture into feminism was predictably criticized. His responses then were the only occasion when he responded directly to his critics – previously he had never deigned to do so. Otherwise his last years were occupied with some minor methodological notes, and the presidential address to the American Sociological Association that he was unable to deliver, due to terminal cancer.

In hindsight, it's clear that Goffman would have done better to heed Herbert Blumer's advice to direct his research to the fragility of large-scale social order, and to the unexpectedly great extent that the lifeblood of corporations, nations, and other complex systems is precisely that small-scale personal interaction that Goffman specialized in. Blumer could not have built the Berkeley Sociology Department from the ground up, as he did, without an acute understanding of each professor's unique talent and way of thinking. As a professional football player and as a sociologist, he learned to read people, and sensed their future direction. He tried to nudge Goffman in what would have been both a creative and logical direction. Subsequent developments have placed in much sharper relief the organic inter-relationships of the personal world with that of political economy, showing just how prescient Blumer's advice was. In ironic tribute to Goffman's research methods, contemporary America has found to its dismay that disturbing the norms of families, friends, and voluntary associations has the power to wreck corporations and nations too.

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<sup>25</sup> Thomas Schelling, *The Strategy of Conflict*, Harvard University Press, 1980

Erving Goffman's inquiries into common-sense resonate today with greater amplitude than in his time. For what passes as common-sense today (2023) is no longer common and no longer sensical. The general consensus that once seemed permanent has been smashed into hundreds of querulous tribal nano-particles, each bent on claiming normal or even sacred status for itself and de-legitimizing all the others. And sense-perception itself – observation of nature and society through direct experience as an eyewitness and auditor – incredibly has given way to virtual immersion in narratives devoid of experience, derived from centrally approved views. The very structure of common-sense has been upended. As the Soviet and similar experiences show, however, ersatz versions of reality imposed from above ultimately fail. And while failing, they require progressively more coercion, which of course vitiates the voluntary nature of common-sense. They also depend increasingly on censorship, which inhibits the circulation of ideas and norms, short-circuiting error correction, so that even those who fervently wish to conform to regime narratives become unsure of what they are expected to think and how they are expected to act. This forces them into self-censorship, which is the real object of targeting explicit offenses. One of the most prevalent is '*wrongful noticing*', where the facts of the case are not disputed, e.g. covid-vax harm, illegal border-crossing, or bribery of a president, but the offense consists in violating the tacit agreement not to mention these things, or to pretend that they don't exist. The 'truth' norm in public and private discourse is thus superseded by obedience to regime narrative. This thrusts everyone into a situation of anomie<sup>26</sup> where norms are uncertain because what is officially proclaimed ('covid vaccines are safe and effective', 'open borders are good for diversity', 'I had no knowledge of my son's business affairs') is contradicted by personal experience, the experiences of others, and independent expert testimony. The momentary 'dysphoria' that Goffman observed among Shetlanders when someone is 'out of countenance' or ill-at-ease due to some unexpected slight becomes, in anomie, a semi-permanent condition. No one knows quite how to react, nor is there any immediate remedy.

How ironic that Goffman used a term, *dysphoria*, in 1953 that 70 years later is preempted by advocates of genital mutilation cosmetic surgery. For Goffman dysphoria was simply the opposite of euphoria, the general satisfaction felt when a group is spontaneously 'in synch' on the matter under discussion, and everyone speaks appropriately without inhibition. Neither Goffman nor anyone else of his time could have anticipated a complete reversal of the normative order, a world where truth bows down to state *diktat*, and individuals must accept what they know is wrong or lose their livelihoods.

For the record: Boys are boys, girls are girls. Not only are human beings conceived and born with either one sex or the other, every cell in their bodies is either one sex or the other. Their brains are wired differently. Perhaps readers have noticed that women connect ideas across vast realms of apparently unrelated space, while men typically prefer analogies or models even if they are imaginary. Women can bear and feed children, too. To take only two of many

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<sup>26</sup> Robert Merton, *Social Structure and Anomie*. ASR, 1938(5): 672-682

examples. It's not only their genitals that are different, also their guts, their endocrine systems, their whole bodies, and their mental and spiritual lives are radically different. Sexual differentiation has been part of human life forever. The notion that genital mutilation cosmetic surgery can change the most fundamental facts of biology is not only a grotesquely arrogant cause of irreversible misery, it also contributes to all-around dysphoria among everyone. Especially among children and parents forced to accept mentally ill biological males in girls' bathrooms and sports competition<sup>27</sup>, with objectors subject to state surveillance and arrest surveillance of parents at school-board meetings, the damage to shared normative understanding is incalculable.

Latter-day nihilists of the Derrida/Foucault persuasion repeat the sequence that had occurred a century earlier, whereby negation of all that had gone before was quickly followed by a doomed effort to re-make human nature. Then, it was the '*New Soviet Man*', a superman purporting to triumph over history and biology. Then, too, commissars tried to abolish the family, religion, friendship, and all ties of affection and love, or render them subservient to the state. Now, the WEF/WHO/Gates '*great reset*' proposes to abolish all these personal ties, clearing the way for a race of techno-utopian humanoids to advance their cause of global dominion; Yuval Hariri<sup>28</sup> talks and writes about this *ad infinitum*.

Of course natural feelings cannot be abolished, they continue anew in parallel societies, off-grid communities, and faith-based associations. People adapt by appearing loyal to the regime of the day, and living their real lives among family and trusted friends. It's no accident that Erving Goffman's studies of impression management, beginning with '*The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*', acquired a substantial following in the Soviet Union. Without intending to, he had written a detailed guide on how to appear normal when one's inner thoughts depart radically from officially approved views. Stalin's system of state terror owed much to that of the czars. Gleb Ouspensky's memoirs give a vivid picture of everyday life in mid-19<sup>th</sup>-century Russia:

*'One could not move, one could not even dream; it was dangerous to give any sign of thought -- of the fact that you were not afraid; on the contrary, you were required to show that you were scared, trembling, even when there was no real ground for it -- that is what those years [1848 - 1856] have created in the Russian masses. Perpetual fear -- that is the root of the truth about life... panic was then in the air, and crushed the public consciousness and robbed it of all desire or capacity for thought... the atmosphere was full of terrors; 'You are lost', cried heaven and earth, air and water, man and beast -- and everything shuddered and fled from disaster into the first available rabbit hole.'*<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Matt Walsh to Loudoun County Virginia School Board: 'You are all predators...':  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nBXBYADT01E>

<sup>28</sup> <https://www.ynharari.com/>. Hariri is alternately horrified and enchanted by the the techno-future he sketches – probably he is hedging his bets.

<sup>29</sup> Isaiah Berlin, '*Russia and 1848*', *The Slavonic and East European Review*, vol. 26, no. 67, 1948, pp. 341–60. JSTOR, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4203951> Accessed 13 Oct. 2022.

In czarist and Soviet times, and in Nazi and Stasi Germany, mere conformity was often not enough; for appearances' sake, *conspicuous conformity* was required. This meant guessing what officials would expect, adopting that expectation as normal regardless of how crazy it might be, and enacting conformity to it whenever and wherever subject to observation. In the West today, censorship and professional license revocations tend to be targeted at prominent political opponents and those who have obtained a significant social-media following. Violence up to and including murder, on the other hand, is more randomly distributed, by medical means for example, to provide '*plausible deniability*' and deflect blame. Goffmanesque impression management would have greater survival value against discretionary sanctions than against random ones.

At the moment, the clearest observations of how state-sponsored anxiety affects everyday life are those of another top-notch noticer, Matthew Crawford, who in a Substack interview with N S Lyons<sup>30</sup> in April 2023, said:

*'I sometimes wonder how difficult it may be for a young person to imagine how un-administered life was just a short time ago. And how easy. For example, material culture was not alienating and frustrating: stuff just worked. One reason, I am sure, is that there weren't mysteries embedded in your things, a hidden social logic connecting your every action to the hive of surveillance and social management. Your refrigerator wasn't smart. It didn't give you a nudge for healthy habits, it just kept food cold. Your telephone didn't want to integrate you with the hive, it just transmitted the voices of two people (and did so with great clarity). Things had straightforward functions that could be fulfilled relatively cheaply; they were tools that elicited action, rather than portals to hidden bureaucracies that foster passivity and dependence while soothingly repeating "your call is important to us."*

*'If you wanted some good or service, you could use this stuff called cash that you would simply hand over in exchange, without having to register yourself with a voracious machine logic, entirely extraneous to the exchange you are looking to complete, that reserves to itself the right to address you at any time, forever after, lest you miss out on some exciting opportunity.*

*'Also, there wasn't a pervasive moralism badgering you with abstractions (sustainability, social responsibility, whatever) while you are standing in the supermarket aisle, trying to decide which laundry soap to buy. It was just soap, you know?*

*'If you wanted to buy your girlfriend some lingerie, or you were a woman looking to buy lingerie for yourself, you weren't confronted with giant images of obese people (of uncertain sex) in lingerie, as though the lingerie itself is serving merely as bait for the healthy male and the healthy female, to bring them in for some aversion therapy. The lingerie chain wasn't serving a larger social mission –*

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<sup>30</sup> <https://theupheaval.substack.com/p/upheaval-interview-matthew-b-crawford>

*inclusivity, etc. It wasn't integrated into a sprawling ministry of culture. Public space wasn't saturated with anti-stereotypical images that seem crafted to counteract your own social perception.*

*'Schools and therapists didn't encourage troubled children to seek affirmation by bringing themselves into greater alignment with the great leap forward, then refer them to doctors for sterilization.*

*'There is now an ambient political conditioning that is so pervasive, it is hard to bring into focus as an object of scrutiny. It's just the water we swim in. It often feels like the point of it is to "trouble" us, like modern art. That is, to unsettle us and undermine the sense of ease that comes naturally when the most basic things are settled. When the world is stable in that way, people feel a kind of confidence in reality, and in themselves. They feel at home. They can make things happen, because the world is basically intelligible and open to action.'*

For those who prefer to rely on their own intuition and life-experience, common-sense must now be actively sought out. It is no longer freely available. Schools don't teach it, experts deny it, media mock it as hopelessly passé, and social media censor it. For those born into a virtual world, raised on video games, algorithm-managed news dispensing rigidly controlled snippets of acceptable information, common-sense may appear at first as an alien world, disturbingly in conflict with what they believe to be their own thoughts. If in Goffman's day enormous effort was required to suss it out and use it in everyday life, it is exponentially more difficult today with all major institutions arrayed against it. This is strange, as nullification of common-sense undermines the very existence of those institutions; so it is self-limiting. There really is such a thing as objective truth. Common-sense understandings cannot be permanently kept down.

Natural rights of freedom of speech, assembly, worship, enterprise, and other essentials of life are part of the common-sense of Western Civilization. Today we are witnessing a complete nullification of the structure of common-sense, and with it Western Civilization. Those who once regarded Erving Goffman's studies as frivolous, in comparison with political economy, were they alive today, might see how very much the entire structure of society, including the political and economic subsets of that society, depend on those seemingly inconsequential niceties of personal interaction. (The Japanese are onto this, with their punctilious etiquette and careful, though apparently unstudied, attention to personal relations, and their insistence on 'Japanese way'.) The 'movers and shakers' of both the academic and business worlds have ignored small-scale personal relations to their very great peril. Not for nothing have the captors of academia and other institutions forced through ridiculous changes in linguistic forms, such as plural pronouns to refer to individuals of uncertain sex. The perpetrators of such absurdities might not have known exactly what they were doing, but they blundered into some very effective ways of undermining common-sense.

With Erving Goffman's guidance, we could reconstruct the common-sense that has been overwhelmed by counter-intuitive narratives. We would have to explain the obvious and illustrate from our own life-experience the dire consequences of violating its terms of reference. We would have to be oblivious to the shocked outrage of an audience when confronted with the

absurdity of their fervent convictions. And we would have to make sure that the censorship now prevalent in academia, and nearly everywhere that thought is published, not be allowed to throttle the truth. We might be encouraged by the fact that the effort required to force-feed an increasingly skewed version of reality is unsustainable. Common-sense inevitably re-emerges, to align socially shared understandings about natural rights with what we can see and hear for ourselves. For common-sense has the insurmountable advantage of being a natural endowment, able to be summoned at will.