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Remembering Erving Goffman

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Remembering Erving Goffman

Aaron Cicourel

Aaron Cicourel, Professor Emeritus of Sociology at the University of California San Diego, wrote this memoir and gave his approval for posting the present version in the Erving Goffman Archives. The memoir was received on February 18, 2009.

[Posted 02-19-09]

Hi Dmitri,

Here is a slightly revised statement about Erving.

I don't have much to say about Erving despite knowing him since our first meeting at Harold Garfinkel's house on New Year's eve, 1957 in Los Angeles. He was visiting his mother before going to Berkeley.

I was in Berkeley for two weeks in January, 1958 giving some lectures to graduate students in nursing from the Bay area and had dinner with Erving almost every evening. His family had not arrived and mine was in Los Angeles where I was a Russell Sage post-doctoral fellow in the UCLA Medical Center.

I frequently saw Erving from the summer of 1961 to the summer of 1965 and during the academic year 1965-66, I was affiliated with the Law and Society Center at the Boalt Law School in Berkeley. Phil Selznick had organized a kind of on-going seminar. Erving, Shelly Messinger, David Matza, Ed Lemert, Ruth Kornhauser, Carl Werthman, Jerry Skolnick, and a few others were also participants in the regular meetings of the Center. We spent a lot of time together during 1965-66 academic year in Berkeley when I was a visiting professor in sociology and at Phil Selznick's Center. In the spring of 1966, Erving attended my graduate seminar regularly.

Erving and I met at different conferences around the world, in Berkeley, and in Philadelphia. I was attending a research group meeting that was initiated in 1975 in Santa Fe at which Erving was a participant. The group was writing different chapters for a book that was subsequently published. Erving was supposed to be at the Philadelphia meeting of the group, but was in the hospital. We were to see him but he died the night before we were to visit his room.

Our academic interests overlapped and I had used his work in my dissertation and field work with the aged in Ithaca, New York while a graduate student at Cornell in 1956-57.

We disagreed about several things, but it would take too much time to go into details. He was an insightful scholar and wonderful writer and his prose made readers think that he was describing actual social interaction. I always believed that too many people treated his insightful descriptions as "data." The closest he came to describing actual events was in his dissertation.

Whenever he was being "nasty" in public settings, I would threaten to describe his dissertation to others, something that would annoy him but effectively cut him off. He could be difficult socially but we maintained consistently good relations. He was part of a small group at Penn that asked me if I wanted to move there.

Best,

Aaron