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Remembering Erving Goffman

Jeffrey Goldfarb: Then Maurice Janowitz Came Over and Said to Goffman, “Cut It Out, Erving”

This interview with Jeffrey Goldfarb, professor of sociology at the New School for Social Research, was recorded at the ASA meeting in Boston on August 3, 2008. Dmitri Shalin transcribed the interview, after which Dr. Goldfarb corrected the transcripts and gave his approval for posting the present version in the Erving Goffman Archives. Breaks in the conversation flow are indicated by ellipses. Supplementary information appears in square brackets. Undecipherable words and unclear passages are identified in the text as “[?]”. The interviewer’s questions are shortened in several places.

[Posted 11-25-08]

Shalin: So, you saw him twice. . . . Just a second – I am talking to Jeffrey Goldfarb, this is August 3, 2008. We are at the ASA convention in Boston. Jeff graciously agreed to share his 64 cents of impressions. . . .

Goldfarb: And that is exactly 64 cents, no more, no less. The first time I saw him in 1997 at an alumni reception of the sociology department of the University of Chicago during the annual meetings of the ASA. We were offsite from the meeting, at the Reynolds’s Club. The entrance fee, the admittance to the event was, I think, \$5. My friend Les Kurtz was still a student there. . . . The people manning the event were my friends, so I got through pretty quickly. Kurtz was collecting the money in exchange for tickets to get drinks, or something like that. Goffman gave him a bill, and Les gave him \$5 in return. Then, Goffman said: “Give me the other \$10.”

Shalin: What was the bill Goffman gave him?

Goldfarb: The original bill was \$10. . . . The matter of contention was whether the bill was \$10 or \$20. Goffman started. . . . He was really getting to Les: “You bastard, give me the money!” Something to that effect.

Shalin: Sounds like a kind of trust-breaching experiment.

Goldfarb: Les might have a slightly different take on that. You should consult him. But they were in a verbal argument of some sort. Then Maurice Janowitz came over and said to Goffman: “Cut it out, Erving.” That’s the end of the story.

Shalin: Was it understood that it was just ribbing? Was there any doubt on the part of Les that it was a. . . .

Goldfarb: Les is a son and grandson of protestant ministers, and he was really taken aback by this. He really didn't know what was going on. I think Goffman was just ribbing. Morris Janowitz saw what was going on, that it was one of those "Goffman events."

Shalin: A performance. . . .

Goldfarb: He said, "Stop it, Erving," and that was the end of the fight. The second time I met Goffman, or saw Goffman – it must have been shortly before he died . . . probably in 1981, at the ASA conference in Toronto. You can check the date if you want to. I am pretty sure it was in Toronto. There was a memorial for Alvin Gouldner. Paul Piccone was speaking. He was shouting into the microphone to the point that it was impossible to stay in the room. So, a certain number of people went from the ballroom, to a kind of reception area just outside where they could escape the assault on their ears. Les and I were sitting there. . . . I am pretty sure that it was at that talk. In any event, there was Goffman sitting next to someone, eating a sandwich. Les and I were across a broad hallway. . . .

Shalin: It was outside the ballroom.

Goldfarb: Yes, it was outside the ballroom. So, I said to Les: "Go and tell Goffman that eating is not permitted in this area. [Laughing]. And Les, for whom such activities do not come naturally, did it. But he couldn't sustain it. And very soon thereafter he said: "I am only kidding." Goffman got very angry after that.

Shalin: That was the payback.

Goldfarb: Yes, he got very angry at Les. . . . He took great offence at having this game played on him. Those are my two stories.

Shalin: They are terrific! I am glad I had a chance to talk to you. . . . You employ Goffman's intellectual perspective. . . .

Goldfarb: Sure. I took a seminar on Goffman with Barry Schwartz.

Shalin: When was that?

Goldfarb: That would be 1974, I think. No, no – earlier than that – the Spring of 1973. I am going to teach this course next semester.

Shalin: The same course?

Goldfarb: Same course – “The Sociology of Erving Goffman.” I’ll offer my take on [Goffman], but also conceal it a bit during the first section. Will provide an overview of his life’s work, and then we’ll just read books. . . . That should be really interesting.

Shalin: I have been collecting stories about Erving for some time now.

Goldfarb: Did you speak to Robin Wagner-Pacifici? She knew him, I am pretty sure.

Shalin: I would love to talk to her.

Goldfarb: I’ll tell her. And also Eviatar Zerubavel. . . .

Shalin: I just had a fascinating talk with him about Goffman.

Goldfarb: He would be the best for you.

Shalin: What got me interested in the relationship between Goffman and his students was the published account about Harvey Sacks and his dissertation defense. Erving, who served on his PhD. committee, did not agree with something in the thesis. The committee felt that such things happen, that since the rest of the committee was willing to give Sacks a pass, Goffman should step down from the committee. In the end the Goffman stepped down, and Sacks was able to defend his thesis. This is telling because apparently Goffman himself had a hell of a time defending his thesis at Chicago. Anselm Strauss, who was at the defense, describes Goffman struggling with the defense, a drop of sweat literally hanging from Erving’s nose. The scene reminded me how Goffman described the man behind the mask, anxiously focused on the task at hand, doggedly forging ahead. It seems like Goffman’s students replayed the trauma that Erving suffered during his own defense. . . .

Goldfarb: My seminar will be pretty straightforward. We’ll be reading his major works. I plan to assign a major work for each session. My reading of Goffman is somewhat unorthodox, but I think it is true to the person. On occasion, he says he presents an analytic framework focused on a particular dimension of life – a performative dimension, an expressive dimension. He does not deny that there are other dimensions. It is just the focus he chooses. I take him very seriously, but tweak him in one simple way: He uses the metaphor of theater, of drama, centering on the process of convincing the other as to your own self, but he doesn’t actually confront the problematics of theatrical presentation. It is difficult to present yourself in a

certain way. What results from the performance is not known until the performance takes place. Every performance of a theatrical work is different, depending on what the performers do and how the audience reacts. . . . What happens is that the fundamental contours are likely to repeat themselves, but over the long run they won't.

Shalin: Would Goffman disagree with that?

Goldfarb: I don't know. . . . I don't take this as a critique of Goffman. He does not work out the implications of this. And the implication is that this can happen without full consciousness, just as a matter of routine, or it can be actually purposefully acted upon. So, the problematics of the definition of the situation, which I see as central to his work, can be worked on in such a way that suddenly Goffman becomes a political thinker.

Shalin: He disclaimed interest in politics, saying all he wants to do is to get behind the power curtains and see people snoring.

Goldfarb: Yes, but the thing is that when people snore, a lot of things happen. In a very stable society things persist in time without much change, or they change very imperceptibly. But in a place like Russia or Poland, the real history [unfolds]. When you deal with the Solidarity movement, you begin to understand that they were working on redefining the situation. This is a kind of power that is not examined by Goffman. On the other hand, Goffman provides the tools for analyzing the situation. He plays with deference and demeanor, with people pretending to be someone and creating for themselves [a new reality]. Take an illegal seminar held in an apartment – it is not just the books they bring that turn the scene into a seminar. It is also how people carry themselves, how their sense of themselves changes in the process. That is what I mean by the "politics of small things."

Shalin: This is where microscopic events plant the seeds of a macroscopic transformation. This is a kind of a gestation process where the new reality is taking root. . . .

Goldfarb: And the people have every intention of gestating these transformations, of cultivating them, working on them from one moment to the next, from one place to the next. This is a very significant way in which people embark on social change. I think that is what really happened at the heart of the opposition movement, of the dissident movement in Eastern Europe, and now I am working on those things in Palestine and Israel.

Shalin: You seem to be trying to add a political dimension to Goffman's

dramaturgical perspective.

Goldfarb: That is exactly right.

Shalin: You are looking at the universe – uni-verse – from the quantum level vantage point.

Goldfarb: Right. Small things matter. You can add the media. When the camera is on, things happen on a larger scale. Now the internet adds another dimension to the process – interactions occur in the virtual domain as well. This dimension of power has always been there, but it is especially important in our age. I really think Goffman helps us understand the fundamental way this process works.

Shalin: I very much appreciate your sharing your observations with me. You mentioned the person who knew Goffman. . . .

Goldfarb: It was Robin Wagner Pacifichi, who is at Swarthmore. And who else? Yes, Lester Kurtz, who is at George Mason, starting next week, I think. He is really important because he is the person who experienced the whole thing, assuming he remembers it. My guess is, he will remember. I observed what happened to him, and I provoked his reply.

Shalin: Thank you so much.

[End of the recording]