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Erving Goffman's Presentation of Self as ASA President

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Remembering Erving Goffman

Joan Huber: Erving Goffman's Presentation of Self as ASA President

Dr. Joan Humber, professor emeritus of sociology at the Ohio State University, wrote this memoir at the request of Dmitri Shalin and gave her permission to post it in the Erving Goffman Archives.

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A brief encounter with Erving Goffman

My relatively brief encounter with Erving was accidental. I was elected vice president of the ASA when he was elected president. I voted for him on the basis of his research, for I knew little of him as a person. I had first laid eyes on him in the early 1970s. He was sitting on the floor playing blackjack with a young woman in a small room off a hall that led to a huge auditorium where people were already assembling for Si Goode's presidential address. Over the years I learned more about Erving from Arlene Daniels's witty accounts of events at Berkeley when she was a graduate student. Jonathan Turner and Randy Collins made me aware of the significance of his contribution as a scholar.

Erving had run against Elise Boulding, who had reared children before doing graduate work. Unlike her husband, economist Kenneth Boulding, she was not well known, for her research had appeared primarily in specialty journals focused on international cooperation. In the early 1980s the ordered list of candidates that the Nominations Committee sent to the secretary tended to be long because some persons who were repeatedly nominated would just as repeatedly decline.

Erving was pleased but surprised to find himself president, and, like most of the presidents I observed, knew little about its organizational operations. After his first Council meeting he asked Arlene and me to explain some of the discussion as well as the requests women members had made at the business meeting a day earlier. We were pleased that he agreed with our analysis.

Later that day, however, Erving and Arlene, seated at the same table at dinner, disagreed about the right way to prepare a particular seafood dish. Everyone knew that both of them could be outspoken but when Arlene nudged the curtains we humans generally drape over our naked thoughts before parting with them, her intent was generally to amuse. Later, I learned

that Erving was willing and able to make top and bottom dogs alike acutely uncomfortable. But I never experienced that side of him.

Erving displayed his capacity for rage when he learned that a thief in Paris had snatched Renée Fox's shoulder bag and dragged her along the pavement so that her leg was broken. "I'd have killed him," Erving said grimly. I thought he meant it. His liking for Renée, whom I came to know when we served on the ASA Council in the 1970s, increased my respect for his judgment.

Erving's most impressive characteristic was his clarity in assessing what organizations were really like. Except for Erving, most of the ASA presidents I had observed were serious and sincere about their mission. Winning the election indicated that their mode of work was finally receiving the recognition it truly deserved. There was always some truth in this belief, sometimes quite a lot, but a zero-sum game like an election never represents the whole truth about anything. Al Lee exemplified the tendency to have more faith than was warranted in one's own mission. In order to "democratize" the ASA, he had proposed that the task of electing representatives to ASA offices be ceded to the regional sociology associations even though more than half of their members typically did not belong to the ASA, a fact that Al either didn't know or didn't think important. After he was elected, he claimed that he had received a huge mandate: more persons had voted for him than had ever voted in any previous ASA election. Administrative officer Alice Myers finally took him aside and told him that although more members had voted in that particular election than had ever voted before, it was no landslide. The vote was hairline close: Al had barely defeated Tad Blalock. In sharp contrast, Erving had no delusions about a mandate.

One aspect of carrying out a presidential mission was the selection of a theme for the annual meeting. Erving didn't want one. He didn't want to foist his view of the discipline on everyone. I can't remember what he finally chose. A few years later when it was my turn, I didn't prevail either. I wanted the theme of the annual meeting to be "Sociology" because that is what the meeting was supposed to be about but no one agreed.

One thing that Erving took seriously was quality of scholarship. I came to see his work as unique, a contribution that requires a rare constellation of attributes and is thus difficult if not impossible for others to do. Erving seemed to see his research that way too, typically distancing it from that of the symbolic interactionists.

At some time in what became the last year of his life, Erving asked me to introduce him for the presidential address, and he told me exactly what to

say: "This is Erving Goffman, your president. He would rather hear himself speaking than being spoken about." Having said those two sentences, I was to shut up and sit down. I applauded, having sat through many a serious, sincere – and lengthy – presidential introduction. But it was not to be. Erving was too sick to attend. I presided at the business meeting and John Lofland (I think) read the presidential address. Erving's introduction was never used. A few years later I asked a vice president to use Erving's words in introducing me and he agreed. But he then presented a standard introduction.

Unexpectedly, I lunched in 2007 with a clutch of linguists who were attending their annual meeting in Columbus. My guests included Sherri Ash, a linguistic anthropologist whom I had known from birth, and her friends, Gillian Sankoff and Bill Labov. It was a good lunch. It felt a little as if Erving were with us again.