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Rachel Kahn-Hut
University of California, San Francisco

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Remembering Erving Goffman

Rachel Kahn-Hut: To My Surprise Goffman Called Himself a Functionalist, But His Former Students Assured Me That He Was Only Playing With Us

Dr. Rachel Kahn-Hut, Professor Emeritus of Sociology at the University of California San Francisco, prepared this memoir and approved its posting in the Erving Goffman Archives.

[Posted 01-01-09]

January 1, 2009

Dear Dr. Shalin,

I want to thank you for letting me know about your very interesting project. I read a couple of your interviews with great interest. While I had very few direct contacts with Erving Goffman, mine certainly fit with the picture this work is forming.

I met him once, during the year he was on leave at Harvard. I, with one or two other graduate students at Brandeis went to speak to him and invite him to give a colloquium at Brandeis. My memory -- and it is very vague -- was that he was polite and interested until we got to the point of the honorarium. For the \$50 the department had given us to offer him, (this was probably in 1967) he told us -- in a disparaging way -- he would give us a second hand talk; for significantly more money (I forget the amount) he would give us a brand new one. I replied that the old one would be fine. Since we had not heard it, it would be new to us. My memories are vague, as I said, except my distinct feeling was that I had rarely seen anyone who was so comfortable being obviously disparaging to subordinates. I think the person I went to see him with might have been Barrie Thorne who can be found at UC Berkeley. If so, she might have better memories of the encounter than I do. If it was not her, it would probably have been a woman who has subsequently died.

My memory is that the next semester he and the Brandeis faculty worked something out, and for considerably more money, he spent a whole day with the department. (To my surprise, either in his talk or in response to questions, he called himself a functionalist. THAT stuck in my mind! Later when I mentioned this to some of his former students, they assured me that he was only playing with us.)

The only other time I was around Goffman was not when he presented Gender

Advertisements at the ASA (I am not certain I was there.) but rather at his dry run for an SWS meeting held at Sherri Cavan's house in San Francisco. I don't have any strong impression from that day. The rooms were very crowded. The presentation was very interesting -- though I did not think that he ever gave enough credit to Lennie Weitzman's work which he acknowledged had started him thinking about using visual images. I vaguely remember that he did not really leave time in the presentation for comments from the largely (if not entirely) female audience. I think that there was some considerable dissatisfaction about his lack of interest in the responses of women about a project which was an exploration of the media presentation of women.

That is the totality of my contacts with Erving Goffman. Not much in itself. But these memories do seem to show a consistency of behavior with his treatment of others. It is too bad that you will not be able to speak with Murray Davis. Though his initial encounter with Goffman was bad, I believe that the contacts improved later. Something tells me that Murray might have been more accepting -- and less critical -- of some of Goffman's behavior.

Perhaps a person you should speak to is Joan Emerson, if she is willing to go back over those days. She long ago left sociology. I do not know how to reach her, but Arlene Daniels does. Joan may be the only person to send Goffman a note to inform him that she had dismissed him from her dissertation committee.

Good luck on this project,

Rachel Kahn-Hut