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Remembering Erving Goffman

Peter Manning: Encounters with Erving Goffman

September 15, 2007

Dmitri,

I have some Goffman stories to offer.

- In 1966, I was an assistant prof. at U of Missouri Columbia, with Robert Habenstein (Habi), a friend and former fellow graduate student with EG and Joe Gusfield, Howie Becker etc. We organized a trip to Urbana to hear EG. We drove several hours, hit a dog on the way, and arrived on time to sit down front in a huge packed auditorium (750+ people). Joe G was worried and paced up and down chatting to Habi and others. At 3 pm, EG appears, walks down the aisle with a stack of 4X6 cards, is introduced and gives the finest stand up lecture I have ever heard (part of his unpublished gambling study). After, we all drive to Joe's house for a party. As EG enters the door with Joe, he asks Joe if he has bought his latest book. Joe says no. EG says the greatest thing a friend can do for his friend is to buy his book. We hope to hear from the great man. He eats quickly, we lay back. . . giving him time. . . . Joe has planned a dinner etc but EG announces his son is attending his senior prom the next day and Erving has to return for it. Soon after, we drive him to the airport and he gets on a small DC-3 to fly to Chicago for the flight to SF. I can't recall what we did then! Maybe we drove back.
- I was introduced to EG by Bennett Berger in a hotel bar in Washington DC (ASA) around 1975. Bennett came over to me and said he wanted to introduce me to someone and then brought EG over. He sat down nervously. Small talk. He asked me what I was working on...I did not know what to say and said "I am working on a dramaturgical, Goffmanian view of policing." (The book *Police Work* came out in 1977). I was of course unsure about what to say and had never thought of what I was doing in a "one liner." It was dark and I do not recall his face or what followed, but it was brief and they left.
- My brother Jim and I were in an elevator around 1979 (ASA). Jim was studying sociology at University of Oregon . EG got into the elevator. Turned around looked furtively at me and then him. EG dashed out when the elevator doors opened at the next floor. I am not sure what was going on – my brother and I look a lot alike but. . . .

- I was standing in the foyer of the Am. Anthro. meetings in San Diego (around 1983). Erving came in, looked around, opened the double doors of the auditorium and dashed down the aisle and back out. He went up to someone he knew and began talking. He then looked down the long aisle again at the speaker (John Whiting) and began to talk again. A tall lady points the finger to her lips and said very loudly shhhhhhhhhhhhh! He looked at her and vanished out the back door.
- EG came up to John Irwin and I and did not greet me (John is about 6'6") EG looked up and Irwin and said "You married? (yes) same person? (yes) Okey, How are you? How are things with you? "Not bad" small talk. John says you're looking sharp (EG had on a bright red Lacoste type polo shirt). Erving (whose father was a tailor I believe) says "You got to dress well, look good as you get older."
- I was on the publications committee of ASA and we met with the ASA staff and the incoming president (EG). We walked to a Chinese restaurant and on the way he asked me how I was (I was in the middle of a divorce, living in England , paying for children's costs etc) He commiserated. He was very rude at the restaurant, called for the manger, and explained how the food was cold, no proper chopsticks were provided, etc wrong flavor to the dishes. . . .
- At the same meeting I asked him if he would write a foreword for my book, *Symbolic Communication* . He said no, he did not do this for anyone, students or friends. I asked about the title, he said terrible idea, too vague, never leave content unclear (I think now of his book *Strategic Interaction*). . . . I dedicated the book to him.
- Sometime when I was in Oxford and back and forth I was editing *Urban Life*, a journal John and Lyn started and for which I was the third editor. EG went to a Chinese dinner in SF which I did not attend and was very critical of me for not "minding the store" running a "pocket journal" (one publishing only the work of a network of friends – not properly refereed). I heard about it second hand, he never mentioned it to me personally or wrote about it. I think this was why the only thing he published in what was to become the *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* was posthumous and on fieldwork. . . more or less edited from his remarks.
- When he became President he asked me to organize a session. I was going back and forth from Oxford to the US (Michigan State), was quite disorganized personally and finally told him no. He then wrote back and asked me to do a paper. I said I would (I think). In the end, he was too ill to deliver the address and "Interaction Order" was published in ASR.

He died so painfully. (I cannot write about this without feeling tears in my eyes still). I wrote to express my condolences to his then wife, Gillian Sankoff, who wrote me later a thank you. I never met her.

- I did not go to any occasion honoring his death. I heard John Lofland passed out when talking. John told me earlier that he asked EG if he could meet with him and EG told him to come out to his house in Berkeley (I assume). As I recall it, John knocked waited, could raise no response and was about to leave when EG called out from behind the door "Who's there? What do you want...? He let him in. John told me this was a way to test the intentions of prospective students.
- When "The insanity of place" came out, I was working with a psychiatrist, Horacio Fabrega, Jr. We were writing about labeling, mental illness etc and I knew enough about EG's life to know that the little examples and suggestions about insanity were personal to him. The anger implicit in the essays in *Asylums* is to some degree "personal," and EG became part of a movement to ban restraining orders that allowed one or 2 MD's to put a person in a mental hospital for 30 days or more.
- Most of my early friends after graduate school were EG's close associates and students: John and Lyn Lofland, Stan Lyman, John Irwin, Sheri Cavan, Marv Scott, and to a lesser extent, Randy Collins and Manny Schlegloff. I early on asked Aaron C if he read EG's work, and he said he did and I did ask Erving at Joe Gusfield's house if EG communicated with Harold Garfinkel and I think EG said "he reads everything I write."