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Remembering Erving Goffman

Peter Miller: The Zen of Erving Goffman

Dr. Peter Miller wrote this memoir at the request of Dmitri Shalin and gave his permission to post the present version in the Erving Goffman Archives.

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1. The Zen of Erving Goffman

Curiously, Erving Goffman's sociology, with his emphasis on micro-interactions and micro-environments, holds more significance for me today than anything else in my Berkeley experience. In particular, Erving's Zen style of teaching -- his non-didactic methods, his love of absurdity, his keen observation of, appreciation for, the present moment, his unsentimental outlook on human behavior, and his constant search for enlightenment -- converged with my later experience of living in Japan.

That he came to his perspective in the 1950s, before Zen was really much known in the United States, is truly remarkable. The sources of his thought were probably more personal than philosophical, but he developed it into a philosophy, a methodology, and a kind of applied sociology that appears in retrospect to have universal significance.

Goffman's reversal of perspective, his ability to derive large social structures from everyday life and working understandings of normality, was prescient. As the prestige of grand plans of every variety -- communist, capitalist, whatever -- has faded, what really matters is the quality of everyday life and social interaction.

From his personal curiosity about how people get through everyday life, act normal, and engage in routine social interaction, Goffman uncovered and invented a whole new field of study. He reversed the usual perspective, by spinning the larger social structures out of these micro-interactions. As unpretentious as he was in manner,

intellectually he had enormous ambition.

From my current perspective in Japan, the 'con-artistry' of everyday life is neither surprising nor disappointing. It's part of life. Goffman's calling was not to moralize. In this he was a true scientist, never confusing personal preferences with the way things are. If we are not what we seem, if life is full of concealment, deception, and even chicanery, that made it more interesting for Erving. It also provided him with abundant data for his field-work and for more casual observations. His life's project was to seek enlightenment, in particular as to the mysteries of common-sense, normality, and other things we accept and use almost automatically -- without thinking. Well, Goffman thought about them a lot, and constantly experimented with them, and created an entire field of productive study by reversing perspective -- by regarding the intimate social world as the source of the larger society, rather than the other way around.

2. Reversing the Standard Perspective

Goffman put politics, including the student movement, in the same category as what he called 'big-ass sociology'. His task in life was to reverse the telescope, look at society from the perspective of personal and social interaction outward to the larger social structures. He regarded political economy as 'epiphenomenal' (contra Marx) and 'everyday life' as fundamental, in both practical and intellectual terms. All of our elaborate organizations and institutions are simply personal interactions writ large, in his view. So he simply ignored these political manifestations. He never discussed politics or the student movement in class or in any casual conversations with me. I would guess -- but this must be mere speculation -- that he thought the student demonstrations a waste of time, but enjoyed their disruptive effect, though only up to a point. He certainly would not have wanted the students to take over the university, any more than he would have favored the inmates taking over the asylum.

My first impressions of 'Presentation of Self' when I read it in college

were rather conventional. I thought, 'This is an awful lot about daily trivia.' War and peace, politics, international relations (this was the 1960s) were important. What he was writing about didn't strike me at first as worthy of serious scrutiny. Yet there were a lot of clever aperçus, spot-on observations, literary-type vignettes that made for interesting reading. My conventional reaction, I later learned, was the standard knock on Goffman's work -- that it was anecdotal, not systematic or scientific. In reality, as I have since come to understand, Goffman's sociology was more scientific -- in the sense of clearly separating personal preference from objective observation -- and of more universal significance than the many other brands of sociology (such as the time-bound and culture-bound models of socio-economic development that are now hopelessly out-dated).

I don't remember how or why I signed up for Erving Goffman's course -- perhaps as a counterweight to the public policy, organization theory, and political structure courses. Perhaps there was enough that stayed with me from 'Presentation of Self' that I sought to explore that material in more depth. Maybe I thought it would be more fun, in a quirky sense, than the other courses (which proved to be the case).

My first impression of Erving Goffman is that he didn't strike me as a professor. He dressed casually, had a great sense of humor, and was not at all pompous. When class began, he just sat on the edge of a table and talked. It started out as a 'lecture', but it was more like a night-club monologue (not that I'd ever been to a night club). It was full of piquant observations, some drawn from his field-work, his casual encounters, news articles, detective stories. He brought numerous files of these to class, and instantly located any reference that came to mind.

But there was an overall architecture to these talks, a coherence of thought that held together in every sentence, example, section, summary, and conclusion, a thoroughly-composed work that, from familiar and simple elements, built up gradually into a multi-faceted structure like a symphony. Having been exposed to the obtuse prose favored by sociological 'system-builders', I was particularly grateful for the clarity of Erving Goffman's writing, thinking, and

lecturing. He did more than write and speak coherently about that most elusive of subjects, everyday life; he revealed the extraordinarily contingent nature of reality (yet another aspect of his Zen sensibility).

3. Field-Work

The forms of social politeness were of more interest to Goffman as data than for his own use. He was far from being the only impolite or impolitic person in Berkeley. Indeed there was a lively tradition of such impoliteness, as the film 'Arguing the World' makes clear, that developed at New York's City College in the 1930s. Erving, from the Canadian Midwest, was positively gracious compared to many of these characters. Probably the most famously impolite faculty member was Aaron Wildavsky, author of 'The Politics of the Budgetary Process', which first documented the government habit of spending an entire budget before year-end, as insurance against the the next appropriation being cut. Wildavsky was well-known as having the personality of a New York delicatessen owner. Marty Lipset's brand of impoliteness consisted of offending both the Left and the Right, thereby establishing his credentials for objectivity. Nathan Glazer liked to poke fun at the way the policy prescriptions advocated by intellectuals often ran counter to their preferred outcomes. Jerry Skolnick, at the Law and Society Center up on Piedmont Way, always asked speakers 'So what?' Meaning, Why should we care? It was his impolite way of asking the speaker to consider the interests of other people in the room.

So Erving Goffman had a lot of competition in breaking conventions of etiquette. Which reminds me, he read etiquette books quite carefully, Amy Vanderbilt, Emily Post, Abigail Van Buren (Dear Abby), to understand proper behavior. He often cited letters to Dear Abby in his classes. He'd use pulp-fiction detective stories too, for clues to normality and deviance. He knew what he was doing with his (mostly) intentional violations of convention: always gathering material. Later he got Garfinkel and others to do this work, or carry it to extremes that he was perhaps too old to get away with anymore. Goffman related, admiringly, an experiment that Garfinkel

had conducted (in LA I think), where he had students act for a whole week as if they were guests in their parents' homes. Ask for permission before taking food from the refrigerator, not slouch around the living room, talk politely, etc. Some of the parents deciphered the nature of the experiment before the week was out, but maybe 30 percent of them never did, instead reacting with great pleasure to this unexpected improvement in their offsprings' behavior.

Maybe Erving had enough exposure to polite society through his first wife. I never met her, but I imagine he must have felt like the Woody Allen character in 'Annie Hall' who imagines himself as viewed by Grammy Hall, as a yeshiva student with earlocks, and dressed in black robes. The goyische world is seen as either threatening or loony, and always problematical for Jews to relate to. As a Jewish boy in a small town in Winnipeg, Manitoba, Erving Goffman must have realized he would have to apply serious thought to getting along with those strange people, learn what the rules of interaction were. At some point he must have realized that all people are strange, and that's what makes life interesting. Thus was born, I think, Erving Goffman's participant-observer methodology, whose method was to consider everyone and everything strange, and work backwards from there to what we consider normal.

4. Goffman's Universal Appeal

Goffman's writing really struck a common chord around the world, in a way that few if any sociologists ever do. A Russian student saw in Goffman's minute studies of 'impression management' a vivid portrait of a major preoccupation of life in the Soviet Union. There, of course, giving the impression of loyalty to the Soviet regime was a matter of survival, not merely a means of status-improvement.

Japan would have been fertile territory for Goffman; I don't know whether he or his books got here, or if so what the response was. Few people put so much effort into managing appearances as the Japanese do. 'Honne' (what we really think) and 'tatemae' (the

mask we wear), though worlds apart, are part of every Japanese child's repertoire long before kindergarten. Through Zen, the Japanese are also familiar with the contingent nature of reality, and of existence itself, including that of their own personhood. I suspect the Japanese too would say 'He's writing about us!'

That 'Aha!' response -- of people who thought Goffman was writing about their own particular situation -- was extraordinarily widespread. From this, we can appreciate that Goffman really did relate some fundamental human truths.

How DID he know? His methods were unique, and yet commonly available. He didn't need super-computers, elaborate models, truckloads of survey researchers, or any of the other paraphernalia of pseudo-science. His secret was that he really enjoyed watching people, with all their quirks and devices and stratagems. Watching them intently, then thinking about what he had seen, then observing some more, carrying on a constant dialogue between field-work and interpretation -- that's really all there was to it. It took time, and intense personal involvement. When starting his early field-work in the Shetland Islands, he said the women looked to him like seals. After six months there, he found them attractive. That, he said, was when he knew he was acculturated enough to make useful observations for 'the presentation of self'.

5. Terrorist Behavior in Public Places -- a Contemporary Application of Erving Goffman's Sociology

The presentation of self takes on new significance in the context of today's terror tradecraft. Every bombing, explosion, kidnapping, assassination, etc., requires detailed prior surveillance of the target. The purpose of this surveillance is to discover the most vulnerable times and places to launch an attack. Typically such surveillance is carried out for months, and in the case of more complicated attacks, years before the actual attack occurs. The people conducting this surveillance must be at great pains to act normally in order to blend into their surroundings and avoid detection.

Apropos of 'normality', Goffman would ask his class 'How do you know when you're walking down the street that the guy walking toward you isn't going to stick a knife in your kidneys?' Good question. That led to consideration of demeanor, dress, body language, and the various clues we use to get through everyday life safely. In other words, he portrayed the study of everyday life as an essential survival skill, which it is. This was no mere academic exercise, it was life!

Goffman's work is clearly applicable to detecting and apprehending those who are conducting pre-terror surveillance. By picking up cues that depart from normal behavior in any given situation, observers can detect surveillance activities leading to planned attacks. Of course not all that looks awry poses a threat, but it is really quite difficult to maintain an appearance of normality when one is planning mayhem -- the clues are there for keen observers to notice. It is also striking how many kidnap victims who have survived recall a suspiciously-acting person watching what would turn out to be the snatch spot. It is testimony to the enduring significance of Erving Goffman's work that here is yet another practical application of it, now in a field that was of little or no concern during his lifetime.

6. The Animating Principles of Society

Most valuable of all, in my view, is Erving Goffman's reversal of the standard top-down social-science perspective. The revolution he accomplished in social science was akin to that of the microbiologists in the life sciences (though, unfortunately, with fewer followers). By looking 'through the microscope' of everyday social interaction, Goffman brought into focus the animating principles of society.

-- Peter Miller

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