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Dmitri Shalin Interview with Vladimir Shlapentokh about Erving Goffman entitled "The Pen of a Genius is Mightier Than the Writer Himself"

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Remembering Erving Goffman

Vladmir Shlapentokh: The Pen of a Genius is Mightier Than the Writer Himself

This interview with Vladimir Shlapentokh, professor of sociology at the University of Michigan, East Lansing, was recorded on July 3, 2008. Dr. Shlapentokh recounts his meeting with Erving Goffman that took place in 1979 at Erving's home in Philadelphia. Dmitri Shalin transcribed and translated into English the Russian notes taken over the phone, after which Dr. Shlapentokh made corrections to the following transcripts and gave his approval for posting the present version in the Erving Goffman Archives. . Breaks in the conversation flow are indicated by ellipses. The interviewer's questions are shortened a bit in several places.

[Posted 07-02-08]

Shalin: Let me find a pen. Now I am ready. So, give me the context please – how did the two of you meet, where did the meeting take place, what was the context?

Shlapentokh: We met in 1979. But let me backtrack a bit. Sometime around 1976, before I emigrated from Russia, I came across Goffman's *Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. The book shook me to the core. I and my colleagues studied the book in our department [at the Institute of Sociology, Russian Academy of Sciences], savoring every turn of phrase. We even thought of writing a textbook on sociological methods based solely on Goffman's perspective. I had an article published then in *Literary Review* on what readers like about writers and vice versa where I introduced to the public the idea of a phenomenological approach to empirical sociological studies. Again, Goffman struck me as a star among stars. When I asked a few of my American colleagues about Goffman, they did not know much about him.

After I emigrated to the U.S., I once came to visit in Philadelphia my old friend Aron Katsenelinboigen. He taught at the University of Pennsylvania then. Dean of the [College of Liberal Arts] at the university once visited me in Russia where I had showed him hospitality, and he was eager to return the favor. He asked me if there was anything he could do to help me. I said I had only one

wish – to meet Erving Goffman. So, the dean called Goffman who had immediately agreed to meet me. Aaron and I went to see Goffman at his apartment. That was not a particularly well kept place, as far as I recall. A piano caught my eye, with the music sheets lying open on top. . . .

Goffman was very kindly, hospitable. Now, this is what I told him: “The pen of a genius is mightier than the writer himself.” Those were the words of Heinrich Heine. I explained that Goffman’s theory is a perfect fit for Russia. Surely he described a universal phenomena, but it is particularly suited to describe the Russian social reality, its pervasive mythology [which places a special emphasis on managing appearances]. In the USSR the state spent a lion’s share of its resources trying to present Soviet society in a favorable light to its subjects and to the world. Managing appearances was not only a daily business for the officials but also for the millions of ordinary people engaged in propagandistic exercises. Goffman had a brilliant insight into such a phenomenon as front and backstage performance, and even though he was basically ignorant of soviet reality, his paradigm helped to grasp from a new theoretical perspective the nature of the Soviet system with its two ideologies – one for the public and the other for the elite, and the two communication channels – one for ordinary people and the other for the party apparatchiks.

Shalin: How did Goffman react to your comment?

Shlapentokh: I don’t remember. He hardly understood my enthusiasm. Don’t remember details of our conversation. We talked about an hour. I asked Goffman if he had any of his books that I could send to my colleagues back in Russia. He disappeared for a moment, then came out with a huge pile of his books. I told him, “Now please sign them. My friends in Moscow would very much appreciate that.” He said that he never signed his books, that he had no pupils.

I improvised a talk on Goffman when I was invited to visit a college in early 1980s. Recently, and with great intellectual pleasure, I gave a lecture for graduate students at my university. I should confess that with all my continuing admiration for Goffman, I have

changed somewhat my view of Goffman and his work. Now I think that he underestimates the importance of the macro sociological factors that account for some 90%, if not 95%, of the variance in our presentations of selves. Every community has its norms which compel most of the interactions. To be sure individual differences matter, the personal relations play very important role. However, it is societal norms which mostly determine human behavior, not the environment. Take my department – my grad student tells me: “I cannot follow your advice and bring up this topic critical of feminists. You will get me in trouble.” Political correctness rules in my department, in this country. This is what drives self-presentation. Imagine: I am the only person among my colleagues who will vote for [John] McCain in the upcoming presidential election.

Goffman was a different story. He was spontaneous. He reminds me of [the Russian sociologist] Boris Grushin who also was natural, explosive, unpredictable. As a human being, Goffman was an absolutely free man. His greatness shined through. In this respect, our meeting did not disappoint me the way similar encounters in the U.S. often did. . .

Shalin: Goffman is a fascinating man. But there are dimensions to his personality that I find puzzling, even disturbing. Tales of Goffman bear witness to his darker side. In his recent book, Tom Scheff, who studied with Goffman, recounts a harrowing episode when Erving humiliated Tom. The two were on the plane when Tom got sick. Goffman went on to recount blow by blow how Tom must have felt humiliated trying to cover up his involuntary stomach eruptions during the flight.

Shlapentokh: I have a different view of such matters. By many accounts, Dostoyevsky was a miserable man – mendacious, dishonest, prickly. But as a reader, I can enjoy his books without going into his biography. Indeed, I can enjoy his work all the better if I remain ignorant of his earthy self. My wife Liuda read a recent biography of [Boris] Pasternak, and she loved it. But I refused to read it. I am sure it is well written, but for me Pasternak is just a poet.

Shalin: I understand this position, but for scholars, dwelling on the biographical matters has a different meaning. It is a must. Particularly, in Goffman's case. The man peeped into the people's back stage regions all his life, yet strenuously protected his own backstage. He made sure his archives would remain beyond reach after his death.

Shlapentokh: I understand the need to go into private life when it comes to biographical, scholarly studies. Yes, you can do that. But knowing such personal tidbits spoils the purity of a creative act, of the artistic product which we cannot enjoy in the same way when we go beyond the work itself and dwell on the individual who produced it. [Anna] Akhmatova once said, "If only you'd known what refuse nourishes the poet's verse." Who needs to know? As it turned out, my beloved [Frederic] Chopin was an anti-Semite. So was [Franz] List. Should I enjoy their works any less because of that?

I forgot to mention one important detail about my meeting with Goffman. He was very kind to me personally. He must have realized what the emigration meant for a person of my age when he offered me this advice: "Whatever you write in America, always fall back on your soviet experience." And he was right. What business do I have to opine on the comings and goings in Oklahoma, let's say? Any native with local experience can do that, and do that better than me. My Russian experience is another matter. All knowledge is local, unique. Too much knowledge can hurt you. "Great knowledge makes the wise man sad," the Bible states. We need to be mindful that knowledge may have a pernicious effect.

Shalin: Did you talk to Goffman in English?

Shlapentokh: Yes, of course.

[End of the recording]