

2-28-2012

## Dmitri Shalin Interview with S. Leonard Syme about Erving Goffman entitled "Erving Looked at the Room and Announced, "I See Everyone Is Observing the Rituals of Mourning""

S. Leonard Syme  
*University of California - Berkeley*

Follow this and additional works at: [https://digitalscholarship.unlv.edu/goffman\\_archives](https://digitalscholarship.unlv.edu/goffman_archives)



Part of the [Politics and Social Change Commons](#), and the [Social Psychology and Interaction Commons](#)

---

### Repository Citation

Syme, S. L. (2012). Dmitri Shalin Interview with S. Leonard Syme about Erving Goffman entitled "Erving Looked at the Room and Announced, "I See Everyone Is Observing the Rituals of Mourning"". In Dmitri N. Shalin, *Bios Sociologicus: The Erving Goffman Archives* 1-15.

Available at: [https://digitalscholarship.unlv.edu/goffman\\_archives/68](https://digitalscholarship.unlv.edu/goffman_archives/68)

This Interview is protected by copyright and/or related rights. It has been brought to you by Digital Scholarship@UNLV with permission from the rights-holder(s). You are free to use this Interview in any way that is permitted by the copyright and related rights legislation that applies to your use. For other uses you need to obtain permission from the rights-holder(s) directly, unless additional rights are indicated by a Creative Commons license in the record and/or on the work itself.

This Interview has been accepted for inclusion in Bios Sociologicus: The Erving Goffman Archives by an authorized administrator of Digital Scholarship@UNLV. For more information, please contact [digitalscholarship@unlv.edu](mailto:digitalscholarship@unlv.edu).

## Remembering Erving Goffman

### S. Leonard Syme: Erving Looked at the Room and Announced, “I See Everyone Is Observing the Rituals of Mourning”

This interview with S. Leonard Syme, Professor Emeritus at the University of California, Berkeley, was recorded in Las Vegas on October 12, 2011. Dmitri Shalin transcribed the interview, after which Dr. Syme edited the transcript and approved posting the present version in the Erving Goffman Archives. Breaks in the conversation flow are indicated by ellipses. Supplementary information and additional materials inserted during the editing process appear in square brackets. Undecipherable words and unclear passages are identified in the text as “[?]”.

[Posted 02-28-12]

**Shalin:** All right, today is, let’s see, October 12, and I am talking to Len Syme, who graciously agreed to talk to me, remember the past, and who knows what we can dig. . . . You said you went to Bethesda and met Erving there.

**Syme:** My wife was pregnant, we had just moved from Yale to Bethesda [Maryland]. I had just accepted my first job at the National Institutes of Health there.. We went to visit Erving,. He was living in these high-rise luxury towers just outside of Bethesda, called Pook’s Hill. We went in the towers near the top, and walked into this fabulous apartment. It must have been three bed rooms, very beautiful and totally empty.

**Shalin:** And the year was. . . .

**Syme:** ‘58. I think it was ‘57. My daughter, the one who contacted you the other day, had not been born yet.

**Shalin:** Karen.

**Syme:** Yes, Karen. My wife was pregnant with Karen. It was 1957. We went to visit Erving in this glorious apartment, completely empty except the bedroom. The bedroom had a futon pad, a desk and a chair, a typewriter, and what seemed like a

thousand books – not on bookshelves but piled up on the floor. That is where he did his work. He had no interest in any furniture in the other rooms.. Why he was living there? I think he was separated from Schuyler at that point. So that was '57. . . . He took us for a ride

**Shalin:** That explains it. His wife . . .

**Syme:** She was living somewhere else. So he was alone. He took us for a ride in his car. You know what his car was? It was a Morgan. You know what "Morgan" is?

**Shalin:** I came to this country in 1976, so my knowledge of cars is very limited.

**Syme:** No, Morgans are still sold. They sell about ten cars a year. They are handmade, they are little tiny roadsters, two seats, vey fancy. Made in England. Cost a fortune, very esoteric. Who has a Morgan? But he had a Morgan. In those days we didn't have seatbelts, and my wife sat on my lap, as he drove us around in his Morgan. I don't remember why he did that.

**Shalin:** It was a luxury item.

**Syme:** Yes. Anyway, it was in the course of that meeting that he said, "Look we have all that baby furniture that we are not using. Marilyn, you are pregnant – take it." And he gave us a crib and some other furniture that we used. That is where my daughter Karen slept when she was a baby.

**Shalin:** Tommy [Goffman] was born in '53, you were expecting in '57, so he no longer needed it.

**Syme:** Yes. And my son later used it as a baby as well. It was a really heavy iron crib. . . .

**Shalin:** That was the only encounter you had with Erving on the East coast, no other communications.

**Syme:** You never knew him?

**Shalin:** No, I wrote to him once but . . .

**Syme:** He was a very weird man, not easy to talk to and get along with. He marched to his own drummer. For example, when his father died in Los Angeles, Erving flew in, I think from Chicago. We were all sitting in the living room. The entryway was at a higher level. He came in at an entry platform, looked at the room full of people and announced, "I see everyone is observing the rituals of mourning." Maybe the genius he brought to observing the world was expressed in that statement. He was a keen observer. He was always a strange guy. I remember meeting him at the American Sociological Society meeting, we shook hands, and he had to make a dissertation on the meaning of shaking hands and what that was about. I mean, this is crazy [**laughing**]. How about just being a nice person?

**Shalin:** Do you recall when you had the first chance to observe him?

**Syme:** In Winnipeg. As you know, my dad was rebuilding our house on [Cathedral Avenue], and Erving came to visit for some reason. And my father said, "Erving, grab a hummer and let's go to work." And he had Erving put up a plasterboard or whatever. My sister tells me that Erving loved it! He really got along well with my father. He didn't get along well with a lot of people, but apparently the two of them really connected. I never figured out [why]. Probably my father was completely nonthreatening to Erving, so he could relax. He probably was nice with his study subjects, too, where he didn't have to put on the show, didn't have to respond.

**Shalin:** He did have respect for craftsmen. . .

**Syme:** Yes, and my father was a craftsman, and Erving loved that.

**Shalin:** And that was the first time you saw Erving.

**Syme:** I think those were the [early encounters].

**Shalin:** You must have been around 12.

**Syme:** Something like that, exactly. I remember visiting the Goffman home that was down the street. We lived in a relatively modest home. Still in the ghetto that I describe in my Memoir. The Goffman house was about a mile away at the river's edge. They had a grand house with a sloping roof and cypress trees, right on the bank of the river – it was beautiful. Remember in *The Presentation of Self* he had this thing about a cabinet in the corner of the living room where there is a glass breakfront, and inside it are English bone china and tea cups and saucers – that was in their living room. So, he was making fun of [the place] where you meet in public. You don't invite people backstage where the makeup and the costumes are. That was one of the inspirations for using the stage and actors in his work. I am sure his parents never read his book.

**Shalin:** Erving gave his mother the first edition of *The Presentation of Self*. Before his mother died, she passed it to her cousin, Esther Besbris, who donated the book to the Goffman Archives. You can find the digital version of it on our site. I don't know if Erving's mother read the book, but she had a copy. So that was the first time you saw him. Would you occasionally run into Erving?

**Syme:** No, no, he would just come into town every now and then. He was off studying.

**Shalin:** He was at the University of Manitoba, dropped out after two years, then went to Toronto. During War World II he was liable to be drafted, but according to Dennis Wrong, he enrolled at the University of Toronto and worked for the Film Board of Canada to avoid the draft. . . . Dennis Wrong indicates that Erving was concerned that because of his small stature he might have had hard time in the army.

**Syme:** I agree with that, except you left out one thing. He wasn't a very nice guy, which doesn't help, I think. He was defensive.

**Shalin:** Could you elaborate on that? How would you describe Erving as a human being?

**Syme:** It was almost as if he didn't care what other people thought of him. Could it be that this feisty defensiveness was because he was a short little guy? I don't know. But I do know that his parents were overbearing. They had standards of how people should be.

**Shalin:** Proper, strict?

**Syme:** Oh, absolutely. Max [Goffman] was an interesting guy. You could hardly understand what he was saying – he had a very thick accent. He was obese, and always with a cigar. I cannot remember seeing him without a cigar; a gross person in a way. Erving did not identify with him, and I don't think he respected him. On the other hand, Max was really brilliant. He had investments, he was a millionaire.

**Shalin:** Do you know this for a fact?

**Syme:** Well, he owned like 25 buildings. Money that Fran [Goffman Bay] had was partly her own, partly from Chuck, and I think they still were living on Max's money. He invested right, he made a lot of money, but he was not a very impressive in an intellectual sense.

**Shalin:** But nice enough to offer your father help when he needed it.

**Syme:** Every time my father was in trouble, Max was there with loans. . . I don't know, he might not even have charged an interest.

**Shalin:** When Esther husband's had a hard time, he went to his brother for help, couldn't get the support, but Max Goffman agreed to cosign the loan. When the loan was repaid, they burned the promissory note in a festive display. So he was willing to help people.

**Syme:** My father was a bad risk, but there were never any questions asked. He [Max] always put up the money in both in Winnipeg and Los Angeles.

**Shalin:** Yet, in person he was uncouth.

**Syme:** He was uncouth, crude man, didn't say anything interesting, but obviously a brilliant guy.

**Shalin:** And Annie?

**Syme:** Did you know Fran, did you meet Fran?

**Shalin:** I interviewed her, visited her on her 90th birthday. Were you there at her birthday bash?

**Syme:** No.

**Shalin:** OK. I was there, and I visited her on a number of times.

**Syme:** You know Fran is a very petite hummingbird, always moving.

**Shalin:** She showed me her driver's license which states her height is 5'2, and she said Erving was about the same height.

**Syme:** Yes, but I am talking about the hummingbird part, always buzzing, talking fast – that's what her mother was like. Very petite, I don't know if the word "nervous" [applies], but it was that hummingbird with the continuing movement of the parts. Her mother was like that.

**Shalin:** Fran recalls their mother could punish Erving harshly.

**Syme:** I never saw that.

**Shalin:** He was into all sorts of things, conducted chemical experiment, almost set the house on fire.

**Syme:** [Laughing]

**Shalin:** There were all sorts of stories about some tsoris on his part, but everybody appreciated his brilliance. So you saw him in Winnipeg, any other occasions you two met?

**Syme:** I remember when I came to San Francisco I visited him. He was at Berkeley then, living in the hills. . .

**Shalin:** Yes, it was bought with his wife's money.

**Syme:** I was wondering where all that money came from, because he was always living in these wonderful places. . . . Morgan, that car, it was like two-three hundred thousand dollars. I never really understood where the money came from.

**Shalin:** Did you meet Erving's wife?

**Syme:** Never.

**Shalin:** And you saw him a few times at Berkeley.

**Syme:** Yes.

**Shalin:** At family gatherings?

**Syme:** I can't even remember now. I really didn't enjoy being with him. Brilliant yes, but . . . [he was] dismissive, arrogant, putting people down. . . . I knew he was a brilliant guy, but if a guy is not nice, I just go away.

**Shalin:** I wrote about Erving and tried to show how his written corpus overlaps with his biographical circumstances.

**Syme:** I wouldn't be surprised.

**Shalin:** I feel that sociological imagination feeds on our personal experience, that it is autobiographical in some important ways. The thing I found fascinating about your memoir ["Memoir of a Useless

Boy"] was how you turned your trauma into a successful [scholarly exploration]. And so did Erving, I believe.

**Syme:** That's why I contacted you, because somewhere you said that the beginnings of the person's life often have repercussions in later life. That's my memory.

**Shalin:** Erving pulled himself out of the obscurity. . .

**Syme:** Yes, but you left out his beginnings in Dauphin. We are talking about a town in the middle of nowhere, twenty five hundred people with dirt roads. It was nothing.

**Shalin:** Yes, about 17 Jewish families.

**Syme:** I only knew three. These are pretty humble beginning for a guy who was a world class scholar.

**Shalin:** Your own story of escape that your grandmother urged you to make. . .

**Syme:** I know Chuck had escaped. The two of them were about the same age. . . Chuck had a share in the family business [in Dauphin], and he couldn't wait to sell it and get out of there. I think Erving did the same thing.

**Shalin:** Erving's father died in 1954. It would be interesting to find out how his father structured his will. I know that Erving's mother was managing the apartments in Winnipeg and their accountant was fleecing them. Erving tried to help sort things out. You can read the accounts in the Goffman archives, but I would like to have your comments on a larger issue – how Erving's work impacted his life, how his sensitivity for the phony side of social reality influenced his own behavior, how he was counteracting bad faith. . . . I wonder if you have an opinion on that.

**Syme:** No.

**Shalin:** Do you know Eli Bay?

**Syme:** Oh, I know Eli well.

**Shalin:** He is studying emotions, offering some therapeutic services.

**Syme:** I know. He came to visit me.

**Shalin:** He offered me some perspective. So you knew Chuck and Fran enough . . .

**Syme:** We were very close. But in the end, the reason I didn't go to those birthday parties was that Chuck behaved so rudely to me that I just said I wasn't going to . . .

**Shalin:** What kind of impression Chuck left on you?

**Syme:** He was arrogant, he was a bully, yet brilliant, brilliant guy.

**Shalin:** You see him as an overall success, but I understand that he met some failures in his ventures.

**Syme:** I didn't know that.

**Shalin:** He was a head of a big department store chain.

**Syme:** And he created a down comforter import business

**Shalin:** That I don't know. . . .

**Syme:** You know he was handicapped with a heart problem. He was that shining bright boy in America working for Walter Hoving, vice president for Bonwit Teller. Then he had a heart attack, and after that it was very hard for him.

**Shalin:** OK, that might explain it. But in person he was. . .

**Syme:** Abrasive, judgmental. However, my son, the businessman, he and Chuck loved one another. My son used to go visit him all the time.

**Shalin:** Daniel?

**Syme:** David. They had the most wonderful relationship. I'd say, "How do you do it, David?" And he said, "I just ignored all the nasty things. He is a smart guy, and I love to share my ideas with him." So they got along beautifully. But Chuck was so abrasive and rude that at one point I said I am not going to talk to him. Fran used to call me, "Can we come together?" I just wanted to have nothing to do with them.

**Shalin:** Because of her husband.

**Syme:** Yes.

**Shalin:** That didn't have to do with Fran.

**Syme:** No, no, no. Not Fran. So you really have Chuck and Erving coming from this small town in Dauphin, brilliant guys, and really tough to get along with.

**Shalin:** Can we get back to your father for a moment? You see him as a charmer, presenting himself to people and covering up something. I was asking people who met him how he came across to them, and they remember him as friendly, charming. People appreciated his jokes.

**Syme:** Absolutely.

**Shalin:** There must have been another side of him. People saw him as genuine enough and liked him.

**Syme:** Absolutely, absolutely. He was a center of attraction and everybody loved him. He was drinking all the time, he had latest clothes, two-color shoes, cracked the jokes – he was the center of attention.

**Shalin:** Did your kids know your father?

**Syme:** Yes.

**Shalin:** So they have their own perspective on their grandfather. How old were they when he died – was it around 1980?

**Syme:** They were born in 1959, 1960 and 1963.

**Shalin:** OK, he was a hands-on grandfather, but that side of him didn't make it into your memoir.

**Syme:** Correct. He was very nice with them.

**Shalin:** Clearly, I am pushing the matter in the direction that interests me. Multiplying perspective is what brings us closer to whatever passes for truth and objectivity, and so when I read your memoir I thought it would be interesting to hear your son and daughter on how they remember your father. This could be a fascinating multigenerational study that weaves together various accounts. The same is with your sister who, you say, corroborated your memoirs.

**Syme:** She helped me with the facts. And she got along well with my father. He used to come visit her all the time.

**Shalin:** Maybe your father was competitive with you

**Syme:** She was a girl. It's a different story. . .

**Shalin:** You mention that your sister wrote something.

**Syme:** She wrote a book.

**Shalin:** Did she write about her father?

**Syme:** No, but her mother – she had the same story that I did. Mine was about my abusive father. Hers was about her emotionally abusive mother. My father was great with her. He used to come and visit with her in the middle of the day, and he would bring milk (they were poor), which I thought was corrosive, for he

would sabotage the poor husband by bringing supplies. He always got to be a good guy.

**Shalin:** I could relate to so many things you were writing in your memoir. I didn't know my biological father and had to deal with a stepfather, a brutish guy given to brutal sentimentality that could any time slide into sentimental brutality: "I love you, and that is why I beat you up." Your father was different. He was emotionally abusive, it seems. He didn't punish you physically.

**Syme:** No, no.

**Shalin:** So it was mostly verbal abuse, mockery. Anyhow, if someday your kids would complement your accounts, you'd get a stereoscopic picture.

**Syme:** I get your point. I really understand, it is interesting, and I will do it. However, you are talking about getting a far more accurate [account].

**Shalin:** Which is not your project.

**Syme:** Exactly!

**Shalin:** I shouldn't push my project on others.

**Syme:** It is another project. I could understand that it would be nice to have a more accurate and more developed picture, but my [project] was very narrowly focused.

**Shalin:** What concerns me is that no matter how hard we try to reconstruct event and lives, we remain selective, we leave something out.

**Syme:** No, I didn't get into that, and why should I? You know what your problem is – you are a scholar.

[Laughter]

**Shalin:** I don't mean to press this issue at all. It's just something

that caught my eye, that I wanted to share with you and seek your.  
..

**Syme:** No, but it is very interesting.

**Shalin:** By the way, your sister may have memories of her own about Erving and his family.

**Syme:** I doubt it. I talked to her about you, and she did not have much to say. What she did tell me just the other day is how well my father got along with Erving.

**Shalin:** This is most interesting.

**Syme:** Erving used to come over to our house on Cathedral Avenue, and she told me spontaneously how well they got along.

**Shalin:** Erving liked to tinker, he liked craft, he had a chemistry set – everybody thought he would become a scientist.

**Syme:** Fascinating.

**Shalin:** OK, maybe she remembers Chick and Fran. One reason I am interested in Erving is that we both hail from Russia, though we belong to different generations. I am convinced that Erving's take on self-presentation has a lot to do with the venerable Russian tradition of Potemkin portable villages.

**Syme:** How do you know that?

**Shalin:** Erving mentions this tradition in *Asylums*, where he describes how patients/prisoners are assembled to produce the image of one happy family for the benefit of the public, which dissolves as soon as visitors depart. To me his perspective derives from Russian culture. My mother is from Ukraine, as is Goffman's, so there is less than six degrees of separation. But then, Japanese may feel the same way about Goffman and his distinctly Japanese sensibilities, which suggests that he tapped into universal human nature.

**Syme:** That's amazing

**Shalin:** So I was asking myself how much of Erving's sensibility his parents brought with them when they emigrated from Russia. I don't know if you are aware that Goffman was into amateur plays when he was a student, as was his mother.

**Syme:** Ann?

**Shalin:** Ann, yes. She was a thespian.

**Syme:** Interesting.

**Shalin:** And of course Frances achieved fame as an actress. So there is a certain biographical dimension to Erving's creativity and to my interest in his life and work.

**Syme:** Fascinating.

**Shalin:** Len, you were wonderful. I don't want to strain you. I know you have an engagement coming up. I hope there will be a chance to interact some more.

**Syme:** Actually, there is one thing. You have been studying Las Vegas?

**Shalin:** Did you take a look at the Social Health of Nevada report that I mentioned to you?

**Syme:** I have been talking to my people. If we do some interviewing in Las Vegas [for a project that explores the relationship between hope and health outcomes], maybe we could hire some of your students as interviewers.

**Shalin:** Sure, they have great fieldwork skills.

**Syme:** That's exactly what I have I mind. So let me talk to my people.

**Shalin:** Great. Len, thank you so much!

**Syme:** Thank you. Let's come into the coffee shop.

**[End of the Recording]**