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Dmitri Shalin Interview with Audrey Wipper about Erving Goffman entitled "Goffman Was Very Original from the Beginning, He Had His Own Way of Seeing and He Stuck to It"

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Remembering Erving Goffman

Audrey Wipper: Goffman Was Very Original from the Beginning, He Had His Own Way of Seeing and He Stuck to It

This conversation with Dr. Audrey Wipper, Professor Emerita at the University of Waterloo, was recorded over the phone on September 23, 2009. After Dmitri Shalin transcribed the interview, Dr. Wipper edited the transcript and approved posting the present version on the web. 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 05-10-10]

Wipper: [I was] going to go to Chicago as all the Canadians had done up to that point. But Berkeley was just developing a big name in sociology, as Kasper Naegele told me, “Why don’t you go to Berkeley?” That sounded interesting, it was farther away from home. So I wrote, I guess to Blumer who was the chair at the time, and was accepted at Berkeley. I went there I think in the late fifties, probably around ‘58. Goffman was there at the time.

Shalin: Goffman came to Berkeley in 1958 at the invitation of Blumer.

Wipper: I was the first Canadian, I believe, to go to Berkeley. Then after that others came. Chicago used to be the place where all the Canadians went because of the strong connection that McGill University and Everett Hughes had with Chicago. Everett Hughes and Helen Hughes were big names in Canada. He wrote *French Canada in Transition* and they spent their summers with Aileen Ross at her cottage. So that was the pipeline from McGill to Chicago. So I was originally to go there.

Shalin: When did you start at McGill?

Wipper: I am not sure. I think in the late 1940s. I graduated in ‘52 with a B.A., then I took a year off to work, collected data for my Master’s thesis, and then I went back to McGill to do my

Master's. From there I worked for several years in a research institute on the outskirts of Toronto, in the sociological division there.

Shalin: And how did you end up at Berkeley?

Wipper: Well, it was Kaspar Naegele, a professor at the University of British Columbia, who I met at a sociology meeting and he suggested, "Why don't you go to Berkeley?" and elaborated on how excellent the professors were. So I went to Berkeley. I can't say exactly why I did, but it sounded interesting, I didn't know anything about it. But I wrote to Blumer and was accepted. I think that the department was just developing. So unlike all the other sociologists in Canada at that time, I went to Berkeley.

Shalin: You landed there sometime in 1958.

Wipper: Around that time.

Shalin: Pretty much the same time that Goffman arrived.

Wipper: Well, he was there when I was there. I am not sure if I was there in '57, but he was certainly there already.

Shalin: Did you know Goffman's work before you came to Berkeley?

Wipper: No, I had no idea. The work I knew was Everett Hughes's. He was the big name for sociology in Canada. He and his wife had a close connection with Aileen Ross. They spent their summers at her cottage on Lake Memphremagog in Quebec.

Shalin: How did you first encounter Erving Goffman?

Wipper: Well, I really don't remember. I was a teaching assistant for the course in social psychology that he and Blumer gave. They did it together; it was in one of the big buildings with a large number of students who were divided into smaller groups. As teaching assistants we conducted weekly meetings with the

students to discuss what had been lectured on, and term assignments.

Shalin: Did you observe Goffman and Blumer in the classroom?

Wipper: Oh, yes.

Shalin: How did they impress you as teachers?

Wipper: Well, Blumer was kind of boring. He said the same thing over and over.

Shalin: You are talking about Blumer?

Wipper: Yes. And Goffman, I don't have much of an impression about his teaching. He was very serious, he didn't joke.

Shalin: Was Erving well liked as a teacher?

Wipper: It was a big introductory class. I don't remember him as a scintillating lecturer or students raving about him.

Shalin: Any impression about Blumer's and Goffman's grading habits?

Wipper: They didn't grade. We did all the grading. This was a large class in social psychology that they gave together, so they didn't really have much contact with the students. The teaching assistants were hands-on with the students.

Shalin: And the type of exams given?

Wipper: I really don't remember. We did all the markings. . . .

Shalin: Any particular impression that Erving left on you – the way he dressed, talked? How tall do you think Erving was?

Wipper: I know he wasn't tall, but I don't remember considering him short either. I am 5'5 or 5'5 and ½. He was probably my height or taller. He dressed nothing out of the ordinary.

Shalin: So no particular impressions about Erving while you were his teaching assistant.

Wipper: I remember he was fun to be around, very stimulating, anything he would say it was interesting.

Shalin: Did you read any of his works later on.

Wipper: Well, *Presentation of Self*, but I didn't take any classes from him. I took classes on Africa in political science. I did not study with him.

Shalin: Did you take any classes with Blumer?

Wipper: I don't think I took any . . . after all these years, I don't remember writing any papers for him.

Shalin: Which classes did you take at Berkeley? Any teachers you found memorable?

Wipper: In political science – David Apter. He had written on Africa. I got interested in Africa. That's what I did my thesis on, East Africa. Rosberg was another political scientist I took

Shalin: Rothberg?

Wipper: R-o-s-b-e-r-g.

Shalin: Were you a graduate student in sociology?

Wipper: In sociology.

Shalin: Did you take any classes with Martin Lipset?

Wipper: I was a research assistant for him.

Shalin: What about Reinhard Bendix?

Wipper: Yes, he gave the course that we had to take in graduate work.

Shalin: Do you recall the kind of teachers these two scholars were?

Wipper: Well, Lipset would talk about his research. Bendix was difficult to follow.

Shalin: Was it a matter of language?

Wipper: It was his ideas. He was a little difficult to understand. He gave a course on theory we had to take for our Ph.D.

Shalin: Do you recall who was on your thesis committee?

Wipper: I think it was Blumer and Eberhard.

Shalin: And how do you spell that name?

Wipper: E-b-e-r-h-a-r-d, I think.

Shalin: He was in sociology.

Wipper: He was in sociology. His research was in the field of South East Asia.

Shalin: Any one else?

Wipper: Oh, we all took a course from Selvin.

Shalin: S-e . . .

Wipper: I think it was S-e-l-v-i-n. He was a numbers man. Hanan Selvin.

Shalin: Any memories about Blumer when you worked on your dissertation?

Wipper: He was approachable, but I didn't really work very much with him. I went to East Africa, came back to Waterloo.

Shalin: When did you defend your thesis?

Wipper: I didn't defend it. Berkeley said I didn't have to come down. I was kind of disappointed.

Shalin: When did you get your Ph.D.?

Wipper: Well . . .

Shalin: Was it in mid-sixties?

Wipper: [?]

Shalin: Jackie Wiseman mentioned that you were house-sitting for Goffman at some point.

Wipper: I had house sat for him for two summers when he went to Las Vegas. He asked me to house sit, so I stayed at his place.

Shalin: He approached you.

Wipper: Yes.

Shalin: He would be gone with his family?

Wipper: The whole family went.

Shalin: To Las Vegas?

Wipper: Yes.

Shalin: I understand they also spent time at Lake Tahoe.

Wipper: From what I know he was a card dealer. My impression was that he was a card dealer. He never told me what he was going to do there. . . .

Shalin: Anything you might have heard from other people?

Wipper: I thought that he was doing research. That was my impression.

Shalin: Was it in the early 60s?

Wipper: I don't know. . . . There were two summers that I house sat. I guess I have to look my curriculum vitae to see the dates.

Shalin: Maybe when you read the transcript of our conversation you can do that. Do you have any memories of Goffman's house?

Wipper: It had a marvelous view. As everyone has told you, it was in the hills. It was a large place with the balcony overlooking Berkeley Hills. You had to climb up [to get there]. I don't have much of an impression except that it was very large.

Shalin: Did Erving give you any instructions when he asked you to house sit?

Wipper: He told me to feel free. If I wanted to have anybody up there, I was perfectly free to do that. He just wanted someone to be there.

Shalin: Were you living there by yourself?

Wipper: I was by myself. He was away two summers for a month or so.

Shalin: Not the whole summer?

Wipper: I don't remember if it was two or three months. I think it was more than a month.

Shalin: Did you ever meet Erving's wife?

Wipper: No, I never met . . . Well, I might have met her. But I don't have any recollections about her.

Shalin: And you didn't meet Erving's son.

Wipper: If I saw him, it was when they were leaving.

Shalin: Did you hear anything at the time when Erving's wife committed suicide?

Wipper: I was away away then. A secretary at the sociology department wrote me about it. . . . I don't remember what she said.

Shalin: Do you think you sat at Erving's house before his wife's death?

Wipper: Oh, it was before.

Shalin: Perhaps it was in the early '60s then.

Wipper: Yes, it was.

Shalin: So you were aware that Erving was studying casinos.

Wipper: Right. And wasn't he a dealer?

Shalin: I understand that he trained to be a dealer. I am not sure if he managed to secure a license. Was there any talk about Erving's interest in casinos?

Wipper: No, I don't remember. He was always an interesting person.

Shalin: You didn't interact much with Erving, right?

Wipper: No, I didn't interact much with him. Some of the people [whose interviews] you sent me went out to dinner with him. I didn't. He was a professor.

Shalin: Some of Erving's students, like Jackie Wiseman, had more of a chance to develop a relationship with Goffman.

Wipper: When I said to him [Goffman] that I was going to East

Africa, he gave me a rather hard time. At first I was going to study surfer people who spend time on the beaches.

Shalin: On Lake Tahoe?

Wipper: No, no – on the Ocean. Not beach bums – what's the word?

Shalin: Surfers?

Wipper: Surfers! I was thinking of studying surfers.

Shalin: Do you know John Irwin?

Wipper: I knew of him. Then I got interested in East Africa with David Apter and Rosberg, I decided I would go there. Goffman gave me a bit of a hard time.

Shalin: What was he unhappy about?

Wiper: Oh, he wanted me to study surfers, do that kind of work rather than go to East Africa. But then I reminded him that he had gone to a foreign place to do his research. He had to acknowledge that. Studying surfers in San Diego [was not the same as] doing research overseas.

Shalin: This is interesting. Did you express any interest in surfers to Goffman? Why did he press you to study this subject?

Wipper: Well, I was a swimmer. I used to be a lifeguard at Berkeley, so it was not out of my depth to be around water. His idea for me was to go to San Diego and study surfers.

Shalin: So the idea came from him.

Wipper: I don't think he brought it up. It was my idea.

Shalin: It was your idea?

Wipper: I imagine so. He didn't tell me what I should study.

Shalin: You must have brought up with him a possible research topic.

Wipper: Yes, aha. Studying beach bums and surfers sounded pleasant. I was going to do that for my thesis.

Shalin: For your Ph.D.?

Wipper: Yes.

Shalin: And then you changed your mind.

Wipper: Right. He gave me hard time about changing my [dissertation] topic.

Shalin: Do you think he wanted to be your thesis advisor if you studied surfers?

Wipper: I think he would have, because he was the one who was closest to the topic. Blumer wasn't.

Shalin: Blumer was a theorist for the most part. So Erving urged you to study beach life.

Wipper: Yes. He wasn't interested in me going to East Africa.

Shalin: Were you serious about choosing beach life as a dissertation topic?

Wipper: I guess I was as serious as one gets. I hadn't put out any feelers like finding out where I could do this study. I didn't do any of the hard work like finding where I could stay, how I would handle it. That was an idea I was tossing over, and then I changed my mind. So I hadn't done anything about actually doing this study. I was always interested in East Africa, then I met David Apter and Rosberg in political science and [came up] with an idea that I would go there.

Shalin: And when you told Erving about your decision, he wasn't pleased.

Wipper: Yes, or at least he pretended not to be pleased. I don't know whether he cared that much or not.

Shalin: Do you remember any conversations with Erving? You said he was very serious during his lectures.

Wipper: During lectures he was dead serious. One time a student sat on the stage where he [Goffman] was to lecture. I didn't know what the student did, but he was sitting right up there where he shouldn't be. Erving went up to him and said something, and the kid got up and left. Erving wasn't taking it as a joke at all. . . . It was before he was to lecture. He didn't make any joke about it to the class. It was a large class in one of the main lecture room with hundreds of students.

Shalin: Was it Wheeler Hall?

Wipper: Yes, Wheeler Hall, one of the large lecture halls.

Shalin: Anything else you remember?

Wipper: I just remember him being serious.

Shalin: Did he use any lecture notes?

Wipper: I don't think so.

Shalin: How was he in personal conversations – was he pleasant, was he earnest?

Wipper: We always had very pleasant conversations. I always remember him being very stimulating. He would say things that you haven't thought of, very stimulating to be around.

Shalin: You mentioned learning from the department secretary about the death of Erving's wife, did you hear about it from any other sources?

Wipper: I left Berkeley, so I wasn't around [to hear stories]. I didn't hear any gossip that was going around. . . . I think I am probably remembering from the materials you sent me.

Shalin: Right. I can understand that.

Wipper: The nickname "little dagger" – He was very easy with me. I didn't see that part of him at all. I wasn't one of these smart talkers whom he answered back sharply, like Arlene Daniels. I didn't have that kind of relationship at all. It was very pleasant. . . . We didn't have any of the sharp exchanges some people did.

Shalin: After you received your Ph.D., what did you do?

Wipper: I was in Kenya at the time when I got a letter from the sociology department at the University of Waterloo, asking me if I would come to Waterloo, which was not far from my home town St. Catharines, 80 miles away. At that time Waterloo was one of Canada's new universities. I didn't even know exactly where it was. I liked it in East Africa, I didn't want to come back, but I had run out of money. . . . I went back to my home area.

Shalin: And you stayed there . . .

Wipper: I taught there my whole career. I retired when I was 68, I guess.

Shalin: Over a decade ago.

Wipper: Oh, yes. I am 81 now.

Shalin: Did you correspond with Erving while you were doing research in Africa?

Wipper: No, I didn't.

Shalin: The last time you saw him was at Berkeley.

Wipper: I think I saw him at Boston.

Shalin: At a conference?

Wipper: It could be. . . . I think it was in Boston.

Shalin: You can't remember the occasion.

Wipper: No, I really can't. . . .

Shalin: You mentioned Aileen Ross and you said that she had a paper written by Goffman.

Wipper: Oh, I remember her saying that. She was at the University of Toronto then, and you said he left Toronto in '45, so it must have been before that.

Shalin: I think Erving started his graduate work at Chicago in 1946.

Wipper: I remember her saying that she had a paper of his, she read it, and she didn't know how to mark it, so she said, "I had to take it to someone else for an opinion." He was original from the very beginning. He had his own way of seeing and he stuck to it.

Shalin: Yes, he was independent and original from the start. Was Aileen Ross Goffman's teacher?

Wipper: She must have been. I don't know whether she was a teaching assistant or a professor. I knew her from McGill. Her whole career I think was at McGill. I don't know if she taught at Toronto.

Shalin: So Aileen had Goffman's paper and had to mark it.

Wipper: Yes.

Shalin: She had to give him a grade?

Wipper: I don't know anything more than that. I don't remember what kind of grade she gave. I just remember her taking the paper

and showing it to someone else and asking what she should do with it.

Shalin: Why would she seek another opinion?

Wipper: Because she didn't know how to mark it. It was different from anything she had before. Everybody knew Everett Hughes and his kind of research. Here was a paper that was quite original, and he was just starting out. . . . I don't know what she was doing there, whether she was a research assistant or staff. I just remember her remark.

Shalin: It must have been original.

Wipper: It must have been original. She had other papers, but this was different.

Shalin: This must be something he wrote in 1944 or 1945.

Wipper: That's what I'm assuming.

Shalin: In 1946 Goffman came to Chicago.

Wipper: Didn't he do his Master's there?

Shalin: He was an undergraduate in Toronto.

Wipper: Then it must have been an undergraduate paper.

Shalin: Do you know if Aileen Ross is alive?

Wipper: She died over a decade ago. I think she lived to be 90 almost.

Shalin: I wonder if this paper is preserved some place. We have a document's section on our site which has several papers Goffman wrote while he was studying. We have his Master's thesis.

Wipper: What was his Master's thesis on?

Shalin: His M.A. . . . I am not sure what it was on. His early papers were on symbols of class status. Do you know if Aileen Ross had children?

Wipper: No, she didn't marry. [Her name is spelled] A-i-l-e-e-n. She came from a very distinguished Ross family in Montreal.

Shalin: Perhaps this paper is sitting in some archives. Do you know any other people in Toronto who might have known Goffman?

Wipper: They are all probably dead now.

Shalin: Most likely.

Wipper: They were older than me.

Shalin: I did talk to Erving's sister.

Wipper: Was she older?

Shalin: She is three-and-a-half years older than Erving. She is 90 now.

Wipper: Oh, I thought he was older.

Shalin: No, she was older than her brother.

Wipper: Erving was born in 1925, wasn't he?

Shalin: No, he was born in 1922, I believe. He died in 1982 at the age of 60.

Wipper: Far too young.

Shalin: I met Frances Goffman in Los Angeles earlier this year.

Wipper: Was he different as a child?

Shalin: In some ways, yes, in other ways he was just like any other precocious kid. After talking to his sister I have a better idea about the Erving's interest in drama. Do you know anything about Erving's run for ASA president?

Wipper: Just what I read in the papers. . . . I really wasn't that close to the ASA.

Shalin: And you didn't know much about Erving's death.

Wipper: No, I didn't know that he was sick. Jackie Wiseman talked about it, I think.

Shalin: Which university did Aileen Ross end her career at?

Wipper: She was at McGill. From what I know her whole career was at McGill, so I wonder what she was doing at Toronto. I don't know much about the early period of her career. . . . She had nieces. After she died one of her nieces called me, but we didn't keep up with her.

Shalin: Perhaps her relatives have her archives. I should try to find them.

Wipper: What are you doing with all these materials?

Shalin: Those of us in the Goffman Archives collect Erving's papers, memoirs of his colleagues, student and friends. The materials are available to scholars interested in Erving's life and work. There is no special end product we have in mind. I put on the web whatever I can find.

Wipper: Are there many people [who talked about Goffman]?

Shalin: Some 60 people so far contributed memoirs or interviews.

Wipper: So you sent me just a few of them.

Shalin: Yes, just a sample of interviews and memoirs. The materials we collected probably runs into thousands of pages.

Wipper: Really?

Shalin: I am interested in how Erving's life and work intersected, how they might have reinforced each other. Audrey, I am most grateful for your time. Do you think you have a syllabus for the Goffman's class you were involved with?

Wipper: No, I don't think so. I don't think I kept notes from that social psychology course.

Shalin: If I may ask you, did Goffman's writing have an impact on your work?

Wipper: My work was more historical. I don't think he really connected me to anything I did. My M.A. thesis was on people who ride horses. He said I should have pushed it further than what I did.

Shalin: Erving saw your M.A. thesis?

Wipper: Yes.

Shalin: Where did you do your thesis?

Wipper: At McGill.

Shalin: Did you show him your thesis?

Wipper: He might have wanted to see it because it was on people who rode horses, hunters and jumpers.

Shalin: So Erving read it.

Wipper: Yes, I assume he did because he told me I should push it further than I did.

Shalin: Did he like your thesis?

Wipper: I don't know whether he liked it or not.

Shalin: But he was encouraging.

Wipper: I worked in the stables and I rode horses myself.

Shalin: That would have been consistent with Goffman's ethnographic studies.

Wipper: It was an observation kind of study, yes. . . . Because I was interested in horses and his wife was interested in horses, they invited me to spend weekends at their place.

Shalin: How was he in person?

Wipper: He was always formal, kind, very paternalistic kind of person.

Shalin: It is interesting that he invited you.

Wipper: He did it because his wife was interested in buying and selling horses. Knowing that I was interested in horses, he kindly invited me to his home for the weekends.

Shalin: And you visited him a few times.

Wipper: Yes.

Shalin: Where did he live?

Wipper: He lived outside of Berkeley. It was about half an hour drive. I don't remember the name of the place now. There is lot of fog in Berkeley, so people wanted to live more inland where there is more sunshine. That was common for people to live outside of Berkeley.

Shalin: You had more informal encounters with Blumer than Goffman.

Wipper: Yes, Goffman needed me at his place so it wouldn't be burglarized. Blumer invited me because I had something in common with his wife. . . . He was very kind, very fatherly. He wasn't an intriguing person to talk to. Goffman always had things to say that had double meanings or were incisive.

Shalin: Audrey, can you think of any other people who knew Goffman and who I could speak to?

Wipper: Anyone here who went to Chicago they are dead – David Solomon, Aileen Ross, Oswald Hall.

Shalin: Hall?

Wipper: H-a-l-l. He was a big name in Canada, particularly in medical sociology.

Shalin: They knew Goffman.

Wipper: I don't know. They were good friends of the Hughes.

Shalin: We have the Hughes-Goffman correspondence posted on our site.

Wipper: Was it Goffman after he left Chicago?

Shalin: Yes, after Goffman defended his dissertation.

Wipper: Hughes was on his committee.

Shalin: Yes.

Wipper: Was it Hughes who gave Goffman a "B."

Shalin: Perhaps on the comprehensive exam. Did you hear about it?

Wipper: I don't know where I got it. Must be in something you sent me. Something happened that caused him to cry.

Shalin: That's right. There is a story somewhere about Erving crying after an exam. He didn't do as well as he hoped for. Well, Audrey, thank you for sharing your memories.

Wipper: Well, it was very pleasant talking about it.

Shalin: When I am done transcribing our conversation, I will send you the text, so you can edit it. You don't use email, right?

Wipper: No, I don't.

Shalin: You can add more memories when you work on the final text. Thank you so much.

Wipper: You are welcome

Shalin: Bye-bye.

Wipper: Bye.