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Dmitri Shalin Interview with Peter Manning about Erving Goffman entitled "Manning-Shalin on Goffman"

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Manning-Shalin on Goffman, 2007

September 15, 2007

Dmitri, I am attaching a file with some "stories" about EG and few observations of my own. . . .

Best wishes,

Peter

I have of course written on EG's work and life [but] to a lesser extent. I think EG, like Garfinkel, was not doing these things as a way of being aggressive, rude, uncivil, or the like. This is crucial I think to your analysis. It was I think a way of demonstrating just how fragile order and ordering is and, on the other hand, its resilience. For the most part, day after day breaches are the rarest of exceptions – they illustrate the daily orderliness of the interaction order. These performances were not about the breach but about order. In some way, these ploys had a reflexive hope – life goes on even if. . . . As he writes in *Stigma* of course everyone always is vulnerable but not always are these vulnerabilities exploited. I think the quotes from *Miss Lonelyhearts* are "deep Goffman."

In your paper ["Signing in the Flesh: Notes on Pragmatist Hermeneutics], you make several attributions to EG which hinge on the PSEL, not the entire corpus. The instrumental expressive idea was never a dichotomy, only a way of capturing how people feel or sense their own projections. They cannot be divided as *Strategic Interaction* makes very clear. The shift in *FA* is more than a re-thinking; I think it stands outside all of his work as a massive attempt abandoned to create a grand system: an outline for *FA*, not an *FA*. The book is not a frame analysis of society, it is a handbook of examples of framing. I believe he did believe that people thought of themselves as embodied and had a self and acted that way, but he personally felt all such concepts were situational – relevant in the situation, and only as displayed there.

His connections to pragmatism are weak in my view because as you say, he does not examine the sequences of interactions that produce natural histories, careers, or persons-with-lives. He is closer to Merleau-Ponty intellectually than Mead. I think Goffman eschewed citation to "philosophic writing" for a very clear and simple reason: he wanted to be known for the ideas; dramatized their stark originality by absence of footnotes and explanations; was playful and oblique in his footnotes. In this sense, too, he resembles Garfinkel and Wittgenstein. I see his work in this world, not in the world of pragmatism.

In my view, the most important semiotician of this century is Eco, and I am surprised that you do not discuss his work or even cite it. I take your points about Derrida's critique of Saussure.

Well, these are reflections. I have been asked to write something more about his work, so I may mull this list over. Please do keep me up to date on the project and if you find these useful. I see re-reading your long paper that there is much to re-think and re-read, but you are raising very important questions.

September 15, 2007

Peter,

Your note and reminiscences about Goffman are most helpful. They give me a better idea about what I am dealing with and how to go about the Goffman project. Among the issues that need to be addressed are (a) how to assemble an image of a historical agent from the impressions it left on its contemporaries, (b) how recorded impressions mesh with other traces and records the agent left behind, and (c) how to aggregate various accounts and material artifacts associated with a given agent into a narrative that binds together body, agency, and structure. The challenge is to grasp the agent in its disparate, historically grounded, culturally specific, contradictory enfoldments that let us scan the widest possible range of agent's embodiment.

So far as the accounts go, it might be helpful to distinguish between (1) **hearsay** – tales about the person floating around without a clear attribution; (2) **anecdotes** – stories traced to a particular source but not necessarily witnessed by the narrator; (3) **episodes** – single events witnessed by a narrator who did not play a major part in the encounter; (4) **encounters** – an interaction in which the narrator directly engaged with the person in question; (5) **transactions** – series of direct and indirect encounters stretching over the course of time and hinting at a pattern; (6) **appraisals** – opinions about the person's agency formed by specific narrators on the basis of personal observations, second hand accounts, and partial record; (7) **reputations** – considered judgments about an embodied historical being based on the personal accounts, institutional records, and other traces that the agent or a group of agents left behind.

It would help if those who observed Erving could share their impressions about his demeanor (e.g., his eagerness to reveal and at the same time conceal his backstage), his deeds (e.g., is the story about Goffman's opining about the

inferiority of female grad student apocryphal?), his physical appearance (e.g., estimates of Erving's heights range between 5.3 and 5.6), manner of dress (some remember him as a dapper, deliberate dresser while others recall him being casual about his clothes).

There is still a question as to why do we need to gather all this info, how does it help us as social scientists. There is also a legitimate concern about invading Goffman's privacy. Cannot say I resolved these issues in my mind, but I feel that the Goffman project may aid our efforts as sociologists. Such tidbits may tell us something of interest not only about his singular existence but also about his age, academic environment, patterns of student-teacher relationship, Erving's pathway to the dramaturgical analysis, maybe even – and this is the most contested point – enlighten us about his research tradition and overall legacy.

Strategic Interaction is probably the only Goffman's book I did not read. Could not locate it in time for my article on pragmatist hermeneutics (the local Barnes & Noble book store had trouble finding a copy for me). This summer a friend lent me a copy, so I look forward to finding out how Erving reintegrated the expressive and instrumental dimensions of social life. The works Goffman published in the last 10 or 15 years of his life did show a greater concern for the body. His interest in embarrassment, role distance, and existential emptiness attests to the evolution of his thought. But these are somewhat roundabout ways of dealing with the flesh, and they do not, I am afraid, resolve the ambiguity of his earlier statements regarding mask as a true being, expressive costuming, and body as a mere peg in the interaction order. His account of mental illness remains problematic for me.

Perhaps I misread your point that "Goffman eschewed citation to 'philosophic writing,'" for I see many such throughout his corpus. Consider the quote from Santayana that Erving uses as an epigraph for the *Presentation of Self*, as well as his direct and indirect references to Sartre, James, Schutz, Austin and other philosophically minded writers. My feeling is that Goffman had serious philosophical ambitions. He interests me as a philosopher. As for Eco, I read his book on semiotics years back but found it a bit tedious. Perhaps I was not ready for it and need to check it out again.

Your thoughts on *Frame Analysis* and Goffman's tenuous relationship to pragmatism are interesting. I also appreciate your interpretation of what many describe as Erving's incivility. It stands to reason that he was testing the limits of social order, exposing what Dean MacCannell described to me as his low tolerance for "fake consensus." In the note I sent you earlier today, you will see several explanations of Goffman's everyday performance, including the one from John Irwin, which dovetails with your observation that

"the quotes from Miss Lonelyhearts are 'deep Goffman.'" Can I quote this line, as well as your other points? I would like to post your note and/or comments in the Intercybelibrary. You can edit/augment your thoughts as needed. Let me know if this can be arranged.

One last question: I cannot locate email addresses for Joe Gusfield, P. S. Strong, and Dell Hymes – do you know by any chance how I can reach these folks? Perhaps you can suggest to me other people who knew Goffman and might be interested in this project.

Once again, I am grateful for your extensive comments. Let me know about the possibility of quoting your letter and posting your observations and/or comments on the web.

All best,

Dmitri