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Goffman, Simmel, and Chicago

Horst J. Helle

March 8, 2014

Dmitri Shalin's article on how Goffman's thinking was influenced by what happened to him is extremely interesting and convincing. To connect the life of a famous author to his work is not unusual, but to do it in the way Shalin did in this text is most remarkable. By reading it I have learned much I did not know about EG, and I have also been led to seeing connections new to me that reach all the way back to Simmel.

What struck me first of all is the context of names that play a significant part in EG's career, many of whom I had the good fortune to meet and know, like Hughes, Blumer, Bendix, Gary Marx, and Tom Scheff among others. In addition, my own postdoctoral thesis (Habilitationsschrift) was based on the concept of the symbol, and prior to that, my dissertation, a participant observation study on longshoremen (Hafenarbeiter) in European sea ports uses the theater metaphor, all this while I was totally ignorant about Goffman.

Let me start with a quote from Shalin's text:

In the fall of 1948, Goffman wrote a paper for E. W. Burgess's course on personal and social disorganization in which he laid out a research agenda that resulted in his first professional publication and hinted at the kind of sociological imagination he would become known for.

Titled "The Role of Status Symbols in Social Organization" (Goffman 1948), this study illuminates the stakes the organizations have in its members' proper use of status symbols and "the constant possibility that symbol may come to be employed in a fraudulent way, to signify a status which the signer does not in fact possess." (p. 7).

This paper written for Burgess clearly deals with "frame manipulation", a concept EG was to work out in more detail later in his Frame Analysis. I would like now to try to get that text of 1948 and compare it with my own attempts of decades ago. Along the same line of research is this paragraph by Shalin:

Citing "the problem of the Nouveau Riche," Goffman proposed to study the status symbols' expressive component as a check on the uncontrolled

proliferation of status symbols in the democratic age with its tendency "to induce in the rising group expectations which for a time are not justified, as well as the devaluation of costly symbols in the eyes of members of other groups."

This reads as if EG might have seen Simmel's text on fashion which also became an inspiration for a publication by Blumer.

A year later, Goffman presented his paper at the annual meeting of the University of Chicago Society for Social Research, and in December of 1951, *The British Journal of Sociology* published its expanded version under the heading "Symbols of Class Status" — a remarkable coup for an aspiring graduate student (Goffman 1951).

Shalin mentions that while EG did not usually want to be identified as a Jew, that did not keep him from referring to his Jewishness as connecting him to other Jews in sentences referring to "we Jews". The same phenomenon can be documented about Simmel in the correspondence between Simmel and his former student Martin Buber (compare Shalin's page 13).

The quote from Simmel that" EG "used as an epigraph to his dissertation was now replaced with another one from George Santayana where the philosopher extols the virtue of masks as the true expression of being. Another eminent philosopher, Jean-Paul Sartre, is cited half a dozen times, compared to one quote from Simmel, who was given extensive treatment in the original text" (p. 16).

I have often wondered if the reduction of reference to Simmel has anything to do with animosities against Germans in the US during the Hitler period and of course during World War II. We must assume that even scholars in a free society are not immune against such influences and thus may yield to including individuals under broad generalizations, just as Durkheim suddenly seemed to reject Simmel after 1914.

If – as Shalin reports – Blumer was instrumental in bringing EG to Berkeley in spite of certain reservations about him, it also raises the question in my mind, if not a deep seated agreement on what sociology ought to be like was shared by them, dating back to Park and Burgess, and via Park to Simmel whose student Park was in Berlin. The same can be assumed for EG's relationship with Hughes who was known as an admirer of Simmel (16).

On December 13, 1960, he wrote to Everett Hughes: "Until Christmas I'll be in the field, and return for nine months in August, the field in this case being the city of non-homes, Las Vegas. Tomorrow I get my police card 'to go on the slots,' and after a few days of that I'll start training to deal 21" (Goffman Letters to Hughes, December 13, 1960). About the same time, Goffman asked Melvin Kohn (2007) to send a reference on his behalf to a Las Vegas sheriff who needed a confirmation of Erving's fitness for the job as a casino dealer. Goffman's sociological interest in casinos was relatively new, his personal involvement with gambling was not (p. 16).

This is most illuminating: Making field work into a hobby while transforming a passion into field work! Finally, and this brings me back to Simmel: EG's confrontation of content with syntactical rules – as with content and "frames" – is reminiscent of Simmel's famous distinction between content and form.

The idea was to bypass the explicit content of communications, grasping directly the syntactical rules governing the interactions. Goffman's work on cultural codes underlying gender conventions fits in with this agenda (p.20).

In summary, it seems that EG's Frame Analysis deserves much more attention from our discipline as does the theoretical work of Georg Simmel.