

The Goffman Reader

Edited with introductory essays by

Charles Lemert

and

Ann Branaman

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To Wesleyan University

*of which we are both children by adoption,
and from whose students, teachers, and alumni
we have learned much of what we know about how to learn.*

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"Goffman"

by Charles Lemert

There was a time, and in some quarters there still is, when the word "Goffman" evoked an understanding so distinctive that one hardly knew what to do with it. To read Goffman was, and is today, to be thus evoked—called out into a netherworld in which the peculiar and the familiar are perfectly joined. As he once said, reflecting as much his own nature as on that of social things:

Universal human nature is not a very human thing.

(*"On Face-work,"* 1955; reprinted in *Interaction Ritual*, 1967, p. 45)

Goffman forces readers out of the convenient illusion that their experience is uniquely theirs. He requires them to tolerate the prospect that, far from being unique, individual human experience may be so insidiously true as to be outside the sphere of things truly human.

In his day (a short one of barely two decades, from about 1960 when his books were first widely noticed until his death in 1982), Goffman's proper name had become an improper word. It was not that, in one of the ill-conceived notions of the concept "word," his name stood for something outside itself such as a particular brand of sociology, or an unusually evocative manner of writing. In the usual senses of "word," "Goffman" stood for little. It was rather that he made something happen; as when a shudder of recognition won't let go of the misery of being a single:

To be alone, to be a "solitary" in the sense of being out of sight and sound of everyone, is not to be alone in another way, namely, as a "single," a party of one, a person not in a with, a person unaccompanied "socially" by others in some public undertaking (itself often crowded), such as sidewalk traffic, shopping in stores, and restaurant dining.

(*"Response Cries,"* 1978; reprinted in *Forms of Talk*, 1981, p. 79)

Fortunately for us today, Goffman's genius was every bit as much literary as observational. Indeed, his fame as a microscope of human nuance may rest entirely on the manner by which he presented those observations in

writing. One of the most unimaginative complaints against him is that he had no replicable method. It is certainly true, as the first-time reader will soon see, that what Goffman observed in us and how he observed it are found exclusively in what he says. He abjured all the self-authorizing manners of scientists and community organizers of various other kinds—appeals to protocols, laws, proofs, techniques, road maps, evidences, recipes, instruction manuals, rules for use, schedules, and the like. For that matter, there are in Goffman no facts as we normally construe them. At best, there are definitions, but these are always quirky like universal human nature itself. Goffman's definitions are really moves against the grain of readerly expectations. When all is said and done, there is not much more than what Goffman says—and this is composed in and around a bewildering collection of newspaper clippings, anecdotes, informal field notes, references to student papers alongside books and articles by those of presumably established repute, and such like. Goffman, the writer, evoked without stipulation; as when he turns so familiar a concept as "action" on its definitional ear:

Serious action is a serious ride, and rides of this kind are all but arranged out of everyday life. As suggested, every individual engages in consequential acts, but most of these are not problematic, and when they are (as when career decisions are made that affect one's life) the determination and settlement of these bets will often come after decades, and by then will be obscured by payoffs from many of his other gambles. Action, on the other hand, brings chance-taking and resolution into the same heated moment of experience; the events of action inundate the momentary now with their implications for the life that follows.

(*"Where the Action Is" in Interaction Ritual*, 1967, p. 261)

But, of course, this is all to the advantage of those of us who read him so long after his passing. He wrote in such a way that, even where the anecdotes are worn out, today's readers can in most instances experience what Goffman conjures up. This magic transpires in the reading of an author whose effect is enlarged by its mysterious location somewhere between incredible fact and certifiable fiction. This collection of readings from Goffman's most important writings relies on this condition and promise of his excellent literary graces, of which just one small instance is found among the opening lines of Goffman's undelivered 1982 presidential address to the American Sociological Association:

For an evening's hour, it is given to each current president of the Association to hold captive the largest audience of colleagues that sociology can provide. For an hour then, within the girdle of these walls, a wordy pageantry is re-

enacted. A sociologist you have selected from a very short list takes to the center of this vasty Hilton field on a hobby horse of his own choosing. (One is reminded that the sociologically interesting thing about Hamlet is that every year no high school in the English-speaking world has trouble finding some clown to play him.) In any case, it seems that presidents of learned societies are well enough known about something to be elected because of it. Taking office, they find a podium attached, along with encouragement to demonstrate that they are indeed obsessed by what their election proved they were already known to be obsessed by. Election winds them up and sets them loose to set their record straight; they rise above restraint and replay it.

(*"The Interaction Order," 1983, p. 1*)

Even if Goffman were no longer able to evoke anything plausible in our world today, it would still be worth the while to read him just as today a reader derives delights aplenty from reading Homer. Few of us know, nor are we among, those whose odysseys are menaced or protected by other-worldly monsters and nymphs. Yet *The Odyssey* is read still by those who journey the face of their worlds longing for a lost home. The genre Goffman created was far from epic. Yet those who travel under the illusions of everyday life are bound to find illumination in the social wonders he creates. The essence of artistic genius is just this: to create verisimilitude enough to draw the client out from what dulls the ability to feel, thus to consider all that life offers. The surprises of social life are there, after all, around and before us at every turn, waiting. Whatever may be concluded about the exact place and value of his social science, Goffman is surely one of the most disturbing guides we shall ever have to the social everpresent; as in the way he uncovers the layers of hidden expiatory functions behind an act each of us performs daily, the apology:

Note that the offender's willingness to initiate and perform his own castigation has certain unapparent values. Were others to do to him what he is willing to do to himself, he might be obliged to feel affronted and to engage in retaliatory action to sustain his moral worth and autonomy. And he can overstate or overplay the case against himself, thereby giving to the others the task of cutting the self-derogation short—this latter, in turn, being a function that is safer to lodge with the offended since they are not likely to abuse it, whereas he, the offender, might. . . . Apologies represent a splitting of the self into a blameworthy part and a part that stands back and sympathizes with the blame giving, and, by implication, is worthy of being brought back into the fold.

(*Relations in Public*, 1971, p. 113)

This Goffman-effect may well be why he has had so very many interpreters and why, more to the point, many of them have sought to normalize him. Even those who so clearly respect the man and his ideas seek to rope him back into range. Anthony Giddens, for example, suggests that Goffman, the least systematic of sociologists, was in fact a "systematic social theorist."¹ (What he meant, rather, was that in spite of it all, there is a common thread to Goffman's wild mix of stuff.) William Gamson, setting himself partly against Alvin Gouldner's famous criticism of Goffman's lack of politics, insists that Goffman's legacy did not exclude political sociology.² (This may be, but Gamson strains to demonstrate the point which, in the end, is more that political sociology ought to consider the microevents out of which political action is contrived.) Pierre Bourdieu, a persistent inventor of rare methods, thinks of Goffman as a kin of sorts, as one who produced "one of the most original and rarest methods of doing sociology."³ (True, but only upon taking "methods" with a grain of salt.) Randall Collins, than whom none is more devoted, thinks of Goffman as above all else a Durkheimian who, among much else, conveyed a reliable account of class difference and conflict.⁴ (True also, but only partly so.) Plus which, there are those like Norman Denzin who are called to abandon Goffman because he had abandoned them—as in the case of Denzin's famous rebuke of Goffman's *Frame Analysis* for its alleged structuralist departure from the more interactive Chicago traditions.⁵ (More later.) Some others, like Gary Marx, remember the man with awe and gratitude for his intellectual finesse but often too with revulsion for the all-too-human Goffman who on occasion held himself above his own notorious interactive offenses.⁶ Marx's reminiscences of Goffman are thus analogous to Alasdair Macintyre's well-known ambivalences toward him: "brilliant," but also a sponsor of "grave cultural loss."⁷

Whether it is praise or complaint, a very great number of the most astute social critics want Goffman to be other than he was—and other than, in most instances, he professed himself to be. Goffman, for all his studied complexities, thought of himself (and his field) in simple terms: a working sociologist, restless before categories and bold to do what analytic work can be done.

From the perspective of the physical and biological sciences, human social life is only a small irregular scab on the face of nature, not particularly amenable to deep systematic analysis. And so it is. . . . Indeed I have heard it said that we should be glad to trade what we've so far produced for a few really good conceptual distinctions and a cold beer. But there's nothing in the world we should trade for what we do have: the bent to sustain in regard to all elements of social life a spirit of unfettered, unsponsored inquiry, and the wisdom not to look elsewhere but ourselves and our discipline for this mandate. That is

our inheritance and what so far we have to bequeath. If one must have warrant addressed to social needs, let it be for unsponsored analyses of the social arrangements enjoyed by those with institutional authority—priests, psychiatrists, school teachers, police, generals, government leaders, parents, males, whites, nationals, media operators, and all the other well-placed persons who are in a position to give official imprint to versions of reality.

(“The Interaction Order,” 1983, p. 17)

It is not so much that Goffman was not what interpreters wish he had been, but that Goffman was, as I said, just “Goffman”—if not quite *sui generis*, at least other than anything else to which we are accustomed, thus always more than he can be taken to be. His brilliance at making things happen with words is most disconcertingly at play in the way his writing actually creates the reader—in much the same way that Goffman describes all selves as subject to transcending relationships:

Each moral career, and behind this, each self, occurs within the confines of an institutional system, whether a social establishment such as a mental hospital or a complex of personal and professional relationships. The self, then, can be seen as something that resides in the arrangements prevailing in a social system for its members. The self in this sense is not a property of the person to whom it is attributed, but dwells rather in the pattern of social control that is exerted in connection with the person by himself and those around him. This special kind of institutional arrangement does not so much support the self as constitute it.

(Asylums, 1961, p. 168)

The experience Goffman effects is that of colonizing a new social place into which the reader enters, from which to exit never quite the same. To have once, even if only once, seen the social world from within such a place is never after to see it otherwise, ever after to read the world anew. In thus seeing differently, we are other than we were. Only resisting fear keeps us the same as we thought we were.

Though Goffman was surely the sociologist he professed to be, he was every bit as much, simply, a writer. This may be why, in certain crucial respects, literary and cultural theorists are sometimes more able to take Goffman on his own terms. Those accomplished in the art of reading intended fictions realize that reading is about letting go, thus to allow the evocations to do their work. Consider the following passage:

He pulled down over his eyes a black straw hat the brim of which he extended with his hand held out over it like an eye-shade, as though to

their work for the exercise of objections to the linguistic turn. One need not recognize more than a few on either list to see immediately that, however much he might have protested his inclusion, Goffman belongs among the former. What is of particular interest is that sociology, for the large part, has been perplexed not just by Goffman's linguistic turn but by the phenomenon itself. But the subject of this observation is not so much the vexations of officially organized sociology as Goffman's ready identification with it in spite of his discipline's principled objection to the literature of language, texts, and discourse.

I am myself convinced that the outsider who best understood Goffman's relation to sociology was Dell Hymes, the distinguished anthropological linguist (and Goffman's colleague at the University of Pennsylvania): "Erving's greatness, I think, is this. In a period in which linguistics was stumbling from syntax into semantics and discourse, and sociology was reeling from renewed zeal for qualitative analysis of interaction, he saw clearly from the beginning what the meeting point would have to be, and that for all the charm and fascination of linguistics, the ground in which the linguistics of social life could flower would have to be sociological ground."¹⁴ At no place is this more true than in Goffman's most linguistic, least sociological paper, "Felicity's Condition," which concludes:

The general constraint that an utterance must satisfy, namely, that it connect acceptably with what recipient has in, or can bring to, mind, applies in a manner to nonlinguistic acts in wordless contexts. These acts, too, insofar as they can be perceived by individuals in the vicinity, will have to be styled so as provide evidence that their doer is engaged in something that perceivers find understandable, even if they are not favored thereby. . . . Whenever we come in contact with another through the mails, over the telephone, in face-to-face talk, or even merely through immediate co-presence, we find ourselves with one central obligation: to render our behavior understandably relevant to what the other can come to perceive is going on. Whatever else, our activity must be addressed to the other's mind, that is, to the other's capacity to read our words and actions for evidence of our feelings, thoughts, and intent. This confines what we say and do, but it also allows us to bring to bear all the world to which the other can catch allusions.

(*"Felicity's Condition,"* 1983, pp. 50-1)

The felicitous condition that accounts for competent linguistic performances is, ultimately, sociological.

It would be wrong, I think, to construe Goffman as some kind of interdisciplinary magpie, building intellectual nests here and there, from

anthropology to psychology and linguistics, talking things up so noisily that even literary people notice him. But of course it is true, as Clifford Geertz proposes, that Goffman is among those who have blurred genre distinctions in the human sciences.¹⁵ Just the same, even when Goffman expressed reservations about his own field, he remained just what Hymes said he was, a sociologist at heart.

I have no universal cure for the ills of sociology. A multitude of myopias limit the glimpse we get of our subject matter. To define one source of blindness and bias as central is engagingly optimistic. Whatever our substantive focus and whatever our methodological persuasion, all we can do I believe is to keep faith with the spirit of natural science, and lurch along, seriously kidding ourselves that our rut has a forward direction. We have not been given the credence and weight that economists lately have acquired, but we can almost match them when it comes to the failure of rigorously calculated predictions. Certainly our systematic theories are every bit as vacuous as theirs: we manage to ignore almost as many critical variables as they do. We do not have the esprit that anthropologists have, but our subject matter at least has not been obliterated by the spread of the world economy. So we have an undiminished opportunity to overlook the relevant facts with our very own eyes. We can't get graduate students who score as high as those who go into Psychology, and at its best the training the latter get seems more professional and more thorough than what we provide. So we haven't managed to produce in our students the high level of trained incompetence that psychologists have achieved in theirs, although, God knows, we're working on it.

(*"The Interaction Order,"* 1983, p. 2)

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Those who are willing at this later date to take up a systematic reading of Goffman would be right, therefore, to wonder about Goffman's relation to sociology. I do not for a minute assume, and we certainly do not desire, that the group of readers interested in this book would comprise only those willing and able to identify themselves as professional sociologists. Rather, noting the far-flung intellectual territories to which an interest in Goffman traveled in his lifetime, this book is organized against the expectation that an interest in Goffman remains either alive in fact or is in prospect of being awakened.

Speaking for myself, I believe (and have elsewhere advertised¹⁶), that sociology suffers when it is narrowly identified with the work of professionals by

whose names it is most commonly recognized. There would be no sociology in the professional sense of the word were there not, prior to any of its sustaining institutional arrangements, a natural and ubiquitous practical sociology with which all competent members of any enduring social entity are thoroughly familiar. That their familiarity is often naive and generally insusceptible of being called to mind in order to be put into talk, does nothing to contradict this assumption. Indeed, there are those who consider this naivety a kind of perverse evidence of the very ubiquity of the practical sociology of, if I may say it this way, ordinary people. More to the point, Goffman himself stood out among those who believed this to be so. This was one of the premises that activated his most famous general sociological principle: That deviants, who do their devious deeds with consummate social skill, operate necessarily according to the same social rules as the normals whose norms are violated as much by studied ignorance of their own covered-over degradations of the values they espouse as by violence done against them, and their norms, by deviants.

It should be seen, then, that stigma management is a general feature of society, a process occurring wherever there are identity norms. The same features are involved whether a major differentness is at question, of the kind traditionally defined as stigmatic, or a picayune differentness, of which the shamed person is ashamed to be ashamed. One can therefore suspect that the role of the normal and the role of stigmatized are parts of the same complex, cut from the same standard cloth. . . . One can assume that the stigmatized and the normal have the same mental make-up, and that this necessarily is the standard one in our society; he who can play one of these roles, then, has exactly the required equipment for playing out the other, and in fact in regard to one stigma or another is likely to have developed some experience in doing so.

(Stigma, 1963, pp. 130-1)

In short, professional sociologists, least of all Goffman, would have little to say if they were unable to rely on the native reports of ordinary members of society, including themselves when out of uniform.

However much the idea that sociology is a practical resource of persons without official training and certification may offend professional sociologists, it is not an idea that would be lost on other practitioners of the human sciences. Physicians, writers, composers, undertakers, comedians, anthropologists, screen writers, news reporters, historians, TV producers, beauticians, poets, parents, dentists are but a few of those who draw their material for creative work out of the mundane culture to which they play. Sociology, being different in many good ways, is not different in this respect.

If I am granted this largely unexplained assumption, I would go on to say that the discovery of it is one of the more important and general convictions to have emerged, alongside and mixed up with, the linguistic turn of the last generation or so—since, say, the 1960s. It could well be said that the most important, lingering, and unresolved argument in and among studies of human culture is the one over the status of language in social life and, conversely, of the social once the status of language is taken seriously.

Among those who take discourse, text, talk in general, or conversation seriously as, if not models, means for construing the social, there is the tendency to write and speak in ways that create the impression that these various epiphanies of language-use are the only true reality there is. This is not always what is meant, though it is indeed meant in some extreme cases of those who have read up on the subject too little or too late. Among those on the other side, who consider themselves proponents of the fundamental reality of the social, there is an understandable (if not excusable) readiness to caricature proponents of the linguistic turn as nihilists bent upon destroying, if not the real world, at least the promise that we can understand it realistically. I have personally been witness to sessions of learned societies in which the most sophisticated people money can sponsor have fought tooth and nail over the meaning of a single line written nearly thirty years ago by the *bête noir* of the linguistic turn. That line, as it is quoted without benefit of reading, is: "There is nothing outside the text." The same line, as it was written in 1967, is: "*There is nothing outside the text* [there is no outside text; *il n'y a pas de hors-texte.*]"¹⁷ Though the bracketed words will do no good for those unfamiliar with Jacques Derrida's painstaking play with the delicacies of the French language, it is plain at least that the text as quoted is something quite different from the text as written. Those repelled by Derrida's linguistic turn may be surprised to learn that the line actually does not mean there is nothing but text, or language. Rather it refers (admittedly in a complicated way) to the complexity of the text's relation to the realities exterior to it. Conversely, there is an equal number of ridiculous versions of the linguistic turn which ignore the real concerns of proponents of the social. If you have not personally witnessed such debates, you have missed very little.

What you ought not miss, however, is the point that one of the most important questions of our day is a question of this mysterious relation. Though their way of talking may sometimes suggest otherwise, students of culture are not, I think, hell-bent on escaping reality by either the linguistic or sociologic route. In fact, one need not have read a word of these controversies to be alarmed by the ever rising confusions that subsist in the dirty waters between social reality and what is *said* about it. What is said in public has very little to do with actual social behaviors. Inspired rhetoric defending American civilization is uttered by individuals who behave, and legislate, in the most uncivilized ways imaginable. The media, which provide the only

instruction most citizens ever hope to get, communicate the most unreal, garbled truths about social life. Heroes are made to be sellers of shoes. And on it goes. One has no need any longer to return to the locus classicus of this phenomenon: "We had to destroy the village to save it." Language's extension into media has turned back on language itself, somehow undercutting social reality.

The central example here of what might be called "commercial realism," the standard transformation employed in contemporary ads, in which the scene is conceivable in all detail as one that could in theory have occurred as pictured, providing us with a simulated slice of life; but although the advertiser does not seem intent on passing the picture off as a caught one, the understanding seems to be that we will not press him too far to account for just what sort of reality the scene has. (The term "realistic," like the term "sincerity" when applied to a stage actor, is self-contradictory, meaning something that is praiseworthy by virtue of being something else, although not that something else.)

(Gender Advertisements, 1976, p. 15)¹⁸

Commercial realism is a fact of social life whereby what is said (including what we say) about what is real and true bears less and less on the social world as it is.

It is possible, therefore, to say that the social critics, Goffman included, who have turned abruptly and insistently to the study of language have done so in order to account for an observable fact of social life: that social reality is oddly, perhaps pathologically, formed out of discourses, including talk and especially media, that bear little direct responsibility to the truth of things. Just as most proponents of the linguistic turn are seeking critical and analytic ways out, around, or over this fact, so their opponents fear that too much attention to the reality of language is part of the very problem whereby talk has no footing in reality, not to mention truth. This, again, is a concern shared widely by most practical sociologists of wildly different cultural and political attitudes. What else is at the bottom of the confusion created today by shifting political alliances on the right and left of most industrial societies if it is not a deeply felt, and evidently justified, suspicion that those in charge do not, indeed they cannot, tell truth from fiction?

"One and a half hours after the President's suite had been cleared of student demonstrators, Grayson Kirk stood in the center of his private office looking at the blankets, cigarette butts and orange peels that covered his rug. Turning to A.M. Rosenthal of The New York Times and several other reporters who had come into the office with him he murmured, 'My God, how could

human beings do a thing like this?' . . . "Jerry L. Avorn et al., Up Against the Ivy Wall (New York: Atheneum Publishers, 1969), p. 100. The great sociological question, of course, is not how could it be that human beings do a thing like this, but rather how it is that human beings do this sort of thing so rarely. How come persons in authority have been so overwhelmingly successful in conning those beneath them into keeping the hell out of their offices.

(Relations in Public, 1971, p. 288, note 44)¹⁹

In this, one among Goffman's many famous footnotes, he refers to an incident in the 1968 student rebellions at Columbia University. That was a time when the culture at large was just waking up to the central fact of relations in public: that public relations turn on the misplaced authority of deceitful presentations. One could say that, for better or worse, today we have all learned the lesson Goffman was among the first to teach.

★

To read Goffman's writing today with the expectation that it is pertinent to the present requires some settled judgment on the times in which he began to write and their relation to the times in which we now read, no less than to Goffman's own coming to terms with a way of writing about the world.

Goffman was born 1922, Jewish and Canadian. It is tempting to account his insistent outsider point of view to the ethnic and national conditions of his birth. This is possible. But it is certain that the date of his birth meant he came of age during the Depression and World War II, completing his undergraduate studies at the University of Toronto in 1945. Goffman's graduate work at the University of Chicago was pursued, thereby, during the absolute high water mark of sociology in America, but in a school that, though well regarded and influential, was considered at odds with the then dominant, professional schools at Columbia and Harvard. Even so, Goffman's student work inclined at odds with a school that was itself at odds with the dominant mode of sociology, most notably in his abandonment of his advisor's recommendation in order to study the social interactions of the Shetlands people. In spite of this rebellion, Goffman completed his doctorate in 1953.

It was not that Goffman put himself utterly outside sociology. To the end of his life he considered himself an "empiricist" and, simply, a "social psychologist."²⁰ Goffman's readiness to be in, if not of, sociology is evident in the very first papers he published before completing his doctoral work. "Symbols of Class Status" (1951) is pretty standard sociology by contrast to "On Cooling the Mark Out" (1952) in which he first displays the method of writing from his own distinctive position to the subject at hand with scant

suggested that any social establishment may be studied profitably from the point of view of impression management. Within the walls of a social establishment we find a team of performers who cooperate to present to an audience a given definition of the situation. This will include the concept of own team and of audience and assumptions concerning the ethos that is to be maintained by the rules of politeness and decorum. We often find a division into back region, where the performance of a routine is prepared, and front region, where the performance is presented. . . . Among members of the team we find that familiarity prevails, solidarity is likely to develop, and that secrets that could give the show away are shared and kept. A tacit agreement is maintained between performers and audience to act as if a given degree of opposition and of accord existed between them. Typically, but not always, agreement is stressed and opposition is underplayed.

(*The Presentation of Self*, 1959, p. 238)

Consider the terms and their cognates and concerns: impression management, teamwork, tacit agreement, familiarity, performance. In the late 1950s these were terms the new social criticism took with some scorn from the bureaucratic culture that was then transforming middle-class America. Goffman did the thinking through that led to his use of them in the early 1950s—at about the same time as Erik Erikson's first studies of identity crisis (1950), David Riesman's *Lonely Crowd* (1950), C. Wright Mills's, *White Collar* (1951), William Whyte's *The Organization Man* (1956), John Keats's, *Crack in the Picture Window* (1957), and Vance Packard's *Hidden Persuaders* (1957). It was not, I suppose, so much that Goffman did what no one else was doing, but that, contrary to the impression that he lacked a social consciousness, he actually worked out his own, admittedly perverse and muted, social critique of America in the 1950s.

This is where Alvin Gouldner's criticism of Goffman is at least somewhat unjust.²² From the point of view of the late 1960s when Gouldner wrote, Goffman did seem very little concerned with political and social issues. But from the point of view of the 1950s Goffman was out there doing no less than others, while Gouldner (just two years older than Goffman) was writing his Weberian thesis for Robert K. Merton on industrial bureaucracy, and others were similarly suppressing their more radical instincts in the face of McCarthyism. It is not that Goffman was a closet political sociologist, as Gamson wants him to be. He was not. But he was attuned to something deeply wrong in American life and, in this, he resonated with others whose social critiques were more overt.

It may seem a very long way from the 1950s to the prospect of relevance for Goffman's ideas in the 1990s. But, I think not. In fact, and this will be

shocking to some, I believe that it is impossible to understand the events that are producing the end culture of the 20th century, including the linguistic turn and all the variant forms of social criticism current today, without a thoughtful consideration of the 1950s.

★

It is always difficult for people to appreciate the changes going on about them, especially so when the changes are as fundamental as those that were beginning in the 1950s in the United States. While Europe and Asia were still recovering from World War II, and while much of the rest of the world was seizing the opportunity of the disabilities in Europe and Japan and the distractions of affluence in the USA to free itself from the colonial system, changes too small to notice were giving first notices.

But how does one describe these changes as they first appeared? Even to mention, or list, them as they were in those days is to take the risk of any causal retrospective: that of naming events then so small that one supposes they could not possibly have led to conditions today so huge and obvious. That the events to which I am about to refer might have had a beginning in this earlier time might be easier to swallow by mentioning them first as we now know them.

Which are the most salient characteristics of the world as it is at the end of the twentieth century? These would have to be: (1) the lack of prospect of any ultimate source of moral or political authority in world affairs and the countervailing prevalence of political and economic uncertainty; (2) the epidemic of hunger, poverty, and disease which disappoint the most basic hope of progress that modern society once held so brashly; (3) and, in spite of these, the incongruous fact that most human beings, even those in the globe's remotest places, are, one way or another, electronically tethered to the rest and the whole.

Moral discord, failure of progress, and the electronic revolution—the list is so parsimoniously obvious that one underestimates the degree to which it also summarizes the very short list of facts upon which people of otherwise incommensurable attitudes can and do agree. In fact, in America, politicians of the right take at least the first two of these as signs of the pending (or actual) collapse of civilization (while equivocating somewhat on the third which some see as both a cause of moral degradation and a device for moral reformation). More precisely Allan Bloom, most cogently, and Newt Gingrich, most recently, assign the cause of these three facts of our time to the 1960s. To them, the 1960s produced the moral failure that causes poverty and is accentuated by the sexual immorality of television and the movies. The political left, such as it is, interprets these facts differently: the 1960s freed oppressed peoples, thus provoking the backlash that

July 24, 1959 and the *Depression of Social Hope*. In 1959 Erving Goffman was just beginning his first academic appointment at the University of California. A new edition of *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* was shipped to booksellers. Goffman was just then becoming a figure of note in American sociology. Those alive and alert that year, whatever they knew of Goffman, would surely have seen or heard about one of its most dramatic political moments: when then Vice-President Richard Nixon debated with the Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev in Moscow. At the end of the decade, America had suffered a number of humiliating defeats in its world struggle with Communism, among them: its failure to act against the Soviet Union's brutal suppression of the Hungarian revolution (1956); the USSR's brilliant success in the space race—Sputnik I being the first orbiting space vehicle (1957); the first major Soviet diplomatic victory in Africa with the acceptance of its offer of support for the building of Egypt's Aswan Dam project (1958); Fidel Castro's defeat of corporate America's puppet dictator of Cuba, Fulgencio Batistá, and Cuba's prompt incorporation into the economic and political sphere of the Communist world powers (1959). The decade that had begun with a Communist victory in China (1949) and the Korean War (1950–3), which had fed the fires of McCarthyism, ended in a worsening of America's world position in the struggle against the "evil empire."

Thus, in 1959 Richard Nixon, already anticipating his run for the presidency in 1960, traveled to Moscow as part of the American delegation to a world trade exposition. The US exhibit was a model kitchen in which were displayed the consumer products that Americans of even modest means could afford for the first time—dishwashers, electric mixers, and all the rest. In the demonstration kitchen, Nixon confronted Khrushchev with a challenge that the USA and the USSR ought to compete not over military matters but in the production of consumer goods of benefit to ordinary people. What seemed a bold move was in fact weak. True, the Soviet production system was so over-burdened with technological and armament expenditures that it was unable to satisfy consumer needs and demands for just such products. But, what was inconceivable then was that the American economy would eventually face limits of its own. Though always the leader in the manufacture and purchase of consumer products, the appearance of widespread affluence in the United States in the 1950s only masked the false prospects of continuous economic growth and equality. Within five years, in 1964, President Lyndon Johnson would act in the same American self-confidence that had moved Nixon's challenge by proposing, and largely enacting, the most massive program of social welfare spending in American history. The War on Poverty, however, was soon undermined by the war in Vietnam, again a venture entered into in the belief that America's economic prowess was such that it could easily afford both guns and butter. The

miscalculations that brought Johnson down in 1968 were not, as it may have seemed, a mere mistake in judgment that any other American leader is likely to have avoided—not Nixon had he beaten Kennedy in 1964, not Kennedy had he lived. Much later, in the 1980s, President Ronald Reagan embarked on a similar sort of welfare program for the already wealthy and soon to be well-off, and hatched it with huge defensive expenditures as well. Though the principles and concerns were different, Reaganomics had the same effects as all the other American economic politics since the 1950s: declining economic growth, falling personal income for the masses (but rising differentially for a smaller and smaller privileged class), disappearing jobs, collapsing social welfare programs for the poor (but not for corporations and the well-off), stagnating educational attainment, destroying social hope.

The first steps in the sad story of disillusionment so well known today were taken after the 1950s. They too were founded on the false security of that earlier decade. The stupid confidences of Nixon, like those of Johnson and Reagan, all derived from an overextended faith in the social perfection of the American economic and social system. It is not that the system was (or is) bad, but that it simply never was what, in the 1950s, so many thought it was. Poverty in America was discovered in the first years of the 1960s by the Kennedy-Johnson administrations. Then, in discovering poverty, it was believed that it could be overcome. Today, a good forty years after, poverty, hunger, homelessness, disease are, in relative terms, as bad as ever and much worse than in the days of Nixon's bold gambit in Moscow.

Nixon, always a ready object for political contempt, should not be judged too sternly on this matter. His naive faith in his system was little different from that of most Americans, including even the most marginal. Many American blacks, for example, began then to feel that their day too had come. It was not a bad dream, and there were surely good reasons to believe in it, but from an economic point of view it was, simply, false. It demanded too much of the already limited natural and human resources of even the American system.

Growth of the sort required to produce even a semblance of the social equality then thought possible would have had to be sustained through the rest of the century. Vietnam, and the oil crises of the early 1970s, hurt. But, again, they were not mistakes, just the first signs of the economic and political facts of life. America, no more than any other truly stratified and diversified society, was unable to keep the promises it made to itself. It would be extreme to say that all this was illusion, but much of it, including the core assumptions, was.

A good deal of social thinking shared the optimism of the times—most notable the sociology of Talcott Parsons and closely allied public intellectuals like Seymour Martin Lipset and Daniel Bell who were then announcing the end of ideology. But, at the same time, in the years on either side of

Nixon's kitchen debate, the social criticism that had begun with Riesman, Erikson, Mills and others in the early 1950s was now intensified and increasingly projected into mass-market journalism. Michael Harrington's *The Other America* (1962), Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* (1962), Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* (1963), Ralph Nader's *Unsafe At Any Speed* (1965) were among the most enduring classics of the mass-market social criticism. Each of these books, and hundreds of others, had one common theme: things were not as good as they seemed. Each was a probe behind the line of illusion that was already weakened by the confusing signs that interposed themselves throughout the 1950s.

Taken as a whole, the then new social criticisms invited a conclusion that went even beyond the fear that America had lost its moral way. Now, more pungently, one could smell the odor of something in the American system that was, if not rotten, at least over-ripe. Then one got the first undeniable whiffs of the notion that the system was at best unable to provide for all, at worst that it never was intended to do so. Then, the illusions of social life became a first topic of consideration. The serious truth behind the fun of the fifties was there to be told.

In daily life, games are seen as part of recreation and "in principles devoid of important repercussions upon the solidity and continuity of collective and institutional life." Games can be fun to play, and fun alone is the approved reason for playing them. The individual, in contrast to his treatment of "serious" activity, claims a right to complain about a game that does not pay its way in immediate pleasure and, whether the game is pleasurable or not, to plead a slight excuse, such as an indisposition of mood, for not participating. Of course, those who are tactful, ambitious, or lonely participate in recreation that is not fun for them, but their later private remarks testify that it should have been. Similarly, children, mental patients, and prisoners may not have an effective option when officials declare game-time, but it is precisely in being thus constrained that these unfortunates seem something less than persons.

*("Fun in Games" in Encounters, 1961, p. 17)*²³

Already, in the mid 1950s, what we now know for certain was becoming apparent: even the most frivolous of the pleasures broadcast throughout the land were the false face of another story altogether, of other truths that could no longer be contained.

September 9th, 1956 and the Electronic Revolution. Early September 1956 found Goffman beginning the last year of his assignment at the Laboratory of Socio-developmental Studies of the National Institute of Mental Health, during which he prepared the important early essays on face work, deference and demeanor, and embarrassment. His first full-time position as a

professor of sociology was still a year away. On the evening of September 9th, Elvis Presley made his first and famously truncated appearance on CBS television's *The Ed Sullivan Show*. Elvis was already a recording star of such magnitude that a rival network, NBC, canceled its regularly scheduled program (it showed a movie instead rather than compete in the time slot against Elvis). Sullivan himself was sick in bed that night but his show swept the ratings. More than 80 percent of all television viewers watched and heard Elvis sing his opening number, "Love Me Tender." Though he was, at first, shy and subdued, the studio audience went crazy. But Elvis began to rock in his second number (a rendition of Little Richard's "Ready Teddy"). The television cameras panned in such a way as to screen Elvis's sexy pelvis from those watching at home. The censoring of his sex had the predictable effect of making just that the next day's talk of the town—and of the nation.²⁴

Though they occurred earlier in the fifties, the US Senate's televised Army-McCarthy Hearings had been a television sensation, breaking the tired routines of early television programming only to bring ordinary Americans into the spectacle of a foolish attempt to purify political morality. The hearings were variations on a traditional theme of American righteousness, even if the observer could well see (as many did) what was wrong. The Elvis appearance, by contrast, symbolized something else, something deeper, more enduring, and troubling. One could already see the tremendous power of this new medium: the power to enter the homes of millions and there, amid the untidied disarray of daily life, to present, with little cost and trouble, realities to which a good bit of the culture was devoted to denying. In the case of Elvis, the reality was the ubiquity of a near-universal sexual thrall, in contrast to the official puritanism. What the Kinseys had documented about sex in America in their academic books in 1948 and 1953 was flashed in the instant of television's attempt to censor. Sex of all kinds was everywhere—in all homes, among all people, even the kids. Today this is not news. It was not really news in the 1950s, but it was shocking, or at least bracing, that it could become such readily available news. As things turned out, sex was hardly the worst of it.

As television rapidly developed into the popular medium of choice that it is today, more of America and the world that had been held in illusion became perfectly, inexorably visible. One need only mention the most unforgettable images: President Kennedy's televisual charm on his election; his and the other assassinations; police dogs and water hoses set upon civil rights protesters in the South; and, surely most significantly, Walter Cronkite's visit to Vietnam early in 1968, when he declared the war unwinnable. Once this most respected of television's journalists declared his opinion, the war was in fact unwinnable, at least from the point of view of public opinion. Within just more than a decade, from the mid 1950s to the late 1960s,

television had come to be the sole source of information for most Americans. It was, of course, and is, a source that shows no mercy, not even in what it hides.

Strictly speaking the age of the visual media, which began in the mid 1950s, is an age in which reality literally came to be a mediated reality. To borrow the old sociological line, what people came to define as real was real in fact to the extent that it was itself defined by the mystery of millions of tiny, invisible dots projected somehow through space into the homes of all alike. Everyone in America, regardless of social rank, saw the same invisible pelvis in 1956, just as after 1968 the illusive victory and inevitable defeat in Vietnam came similarly, if more gradually, into view.

From 1956, it would be still another eight years before the publication of Marshall McLuhan's sensational (and still respected) *Understanding Media*, the first important social analysis of television as a unique medium of communication and social relations. Except for a few tempting pages near the end of *Frame Analysis* (1974) and suggestions here and there in *Gender Advertisements* (1976), Goffman himself never examined the mediating effects of television as distinct from the other dramatic forms that were so crucial to his writing— theater, radio, the newspaper, and the novel. Just the same, it would be difficult to account for the most unusual features of his sociology without reference to the growing influence of visual media on American society. Before McLuhan's important essay in 1964, few understood the special power of television. Indeed, television programming itself was so technically immature by today's standards that it was easy to misperceive television as a kind of radio with pictures, as indeed early news broadcasting and sitcoms largely were. But the distinctive nature of television had less to do with what appeared on the screen than with how the images on those screens intruded upon, and changed, the habits of daily life, the structure of family relations, and the very nature of entertainment and information.

Goffman was among those who understood, at some basic level, that social relations were already by then organized more around the appearance than the content of things. The common theme of the most famous social criticisms of the 1950s was the concern that conformism (or, as David Riesman put it, "other-directedness") in ordinary life was at odds with traditional American and Western patterns of personal self-understanding and social interaction. Vance Packard's books, *The Hidden Persuaders* and *Status Seekers*, developed related ideas crudely. In the latter, for example, Packard argued that Americans were more preoccupied with the superficial symbols expressing their newly won status than with the inner values of personal life. Goffman's *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (first published in Scotland in 1956) is nothing if it was not concerned with the role of expressive strategies in the management of a socially creditable impression.

Every person lives in a world of social encounters, involving him either in face-to-face or mediated contact with other participants. In each of these contacts, he tends to act out what is sometimes called a line—that is, a pattern of verbal and nonverbal acts by which he expresses his view of the situation and through this his evaluation of the participants, especially himself. Regardless of whether a person intends to take a line, he will find that he has done so in effect. The other participants will assume that he has more or less willfully taken a stand, so that if he is to deal with their response to him he must take into consideration the impression they have possibly formed of him. . . . The term face may be defined as the positive social value a person effectively claims for himself by the line others assume he has taken during a particular contact. Face is an image of self delineated in terms of approved social attributes—albeit an image that others may share, as when a person makes a good showing for his profession or religion by making a good showing of himself.

("On Face Work," 1955; reprinted in Interaction Ritual, 1967, p. 5)

Today many live in virtual reality and travel on an information super-highway. Even if one only vaguely understands to what state of informational affairs these terms refer, hardly anyone would dare doubt that, whatever they are, they refer to a state in which information technologies have somehow moved through a visual warp and turned back in time and space upon what we once optimistically considered "real" life.

It is possible to consider Goffman a televisual genius before the fact, and it is certain that he was one of the first social critics fully to appreciate the tenuous grip that our most common social interactions have on what we still prefer to call reality. Goffman was truly a man of his day in that his social ideas covered, if at a certain remove, the basic facts of late modern times: that both moral consensus and social hope are imaginary constructs; and that the essence of social reality has little to do with essences, least of all with essential values. Though he did not judge these conditions one way or another, he was possibly the first to tell us what we hated to hear. Appearances count for more than do truth, beauty, freedom, the good self, and all the other foundational virtues of modern life. More, I think, than anyone in his day (and certainly more than any sociologist). Goffman was a thinking product of those basic facts of our times which had their beginnings in his. This is why he should be read today.

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Still, one might ask, why was it necessary for this televisual genius Goffman to participate in the notorious linguistic turn? Was not a book such as *Frame*

Analysis (1974) one of those rare instances when a truly independent thinker fell incautiously into the faddish structuralist language mania then emerging in all quarters of social theory? First, inasmuch as Goffman was, in the 1950s, an undercover social critic of postwar society, the turn to a more intentional investigation of language was appropriate, if not completely necessary. And, secondly, even granting (as I would) that *Frame Analysis* was his only mostly failed work, the turn to language was anything but fad-following—neither for Goffman, nor the many others. The linguistic turn (so poorly named!) is not about language so much as it is that to which social theory and politics must turn as a consequence of the changes that devolved from the 1950s. This can be seen in the extent to which language and culture have become today a central consideration, the importance of which far exceed the precious habits of academic discourse.

In a 1995 speech to American war veterans, Senator Robert Dole of Kansas, who became the choice of conservatives in the 1996 American presidential campaign, bitterly denounced "intellectual elites" who advocate multiculturalism, including multilingual education: "We need the glue of language to help hold us together. We must stop the practice of multilingual education as a means of instilling ethnic pride or as a therapy for low self-esteem or out of elitist guilt over a culture built on the traditions of the West."²⁵ Behind the chanting of a right-wing creed is Dole's telling confession of the reality of things American: "We need the glue of language to help hold us together." His admission of the tenuousness of the social whole expresses the fear he would wish away. Senator Dole, like most politicians, was doing little more than mouthing a widespread cultural anxiety, one so terrifying that it excites left and right to similar extremes.²⁶

Political differences aside, the facts of our time come down to a bitter, urgent debate over the nature of social reality, behind which one finds the troubling question of language. In the USA there are those who say that America is still what it always was; and those whom conservatives attack who say that the reality of differences today are just those that were suppressed by the old America. Or, to rephrase with reference to language, there are those who insist, as they always have done, that the only basis for social unity is that all speak the same language; and those who believe that the integrity of social groups can only be sustained by giving voice to all its members. It is not by accident that many who believe the former, in addition to favoring a one-language policy, are also inclined to contradict their own patriotic rhetorics by undervaluing the importance of individual rights and free speech. They tend to favor limits on women's rights to abortion, on the writ of habeas corpus, on the rights of media people and teachers to speak their minds however offensively. Conversely, those who believe the social whole lives off the differences of its parts are more likely (in spite of their reputed liberal, closet socialist habits of mind) to believe in due process, free speech,

and multicultural expression. It is not necessary at the moment to judge between the two perspectives (and their many subvariations) to see that language and speech are absolutely central to the arguments over the truth of social reality.

It can be said simply that the linguistic turn in social theory was not the cause but the result of the social changes that emerged as early as the 1950s. It was then, as I have suggested, that the old verities of a single, real and true society began to come apart. A scarce half-century later we see very well the results of the divisions that were then only fissures on the margins of a delicate crystal which, now, having been turned to a different light refracts a thousand points of social color. The alabaster cities gleam differently now. This is more strikingly true in the USA, the most multicultural of the major world societies, but it is just as true, in relative terms, in all the world societies influenced by European culture.

Language is what societies are left with when their members can no longer agree on the nature of social reality. When, by contrast, an official theory of social reality imposes itself over large sectors of a population, then the few voices of dissent will be taken with less seriousness and the majority will be content to trust whatever is considered real. These are the stable times when sciences, economies, and political cultures consolidate and refine advances. These are the times when truths are certain, when all men consider themselves equal, and when the men who count can be counted upon to speak the same language. When such times are shaken, as today they are in the USA and even more terrifyingly in Russia and many of its neighbor states, language is what matters most. In short, when there is little accord as to the society's essential verities, then public debate is forced back into controversies over the rules of the language games in which unbridgeable differences are played out. As a result, in the former Soviet Union the Russian language is losing its universal hold, just when the USA is becoming a bilingual society in a sea of multilingual enclaves.²⁷

This is why there was a linguistic turn beginning in the late 1950s and early 1960s and why, necessarily, Goffman was a part of it. It was not, one presumes, that Goffman was first of all interested in speech and language (though these interests are evident in the earliest writings), but that he was above all else interested in social reality. It was this prior interest that led him, later in his career, to the more formal study of talk, semiotics, and conversation that was hidden but evident in *Relations in Public* (1971), overt but ill-formed in *Frame Analysis* (1974) and *Gender Advertisements* (1976), explicit and well organized in *Forms of Talk* (1981), and primary and formal in "Felicity's Condition" (1983). But a reader of Goffman must never forget that his interest in language and expressive strategies was always there from the beginning *because* the basic question of his life's work was, as he repeatedly said: How does social reality sustain itself?

A character staged in a theater is not in some ways real, nor does it have the same kind of real consequences as does the thoroughly contrived character performed by a confidence man; but the successful staging of either of these types of false figures involves use of real techniques—the same techniques by which everyday persons sustain their real social situations. Those who conduct face to face interaction on a theater's stage must meet the key requirement of real situations: they must expressively sustain a definition of the situation: but this they do in circumstances that have facilitated their developing an apt terminology for the interactional tasks that all of us share.

(The Presentation of Self, 1959, pp. 254–5)

I close with a call to arms. To utter something and to not disconfirm that we are sane requires that our saying be heard to draw appropriately on one array of presuppositions—that sustained by our hearers—and avoid being heard to make others—those which are not, although they may be by persons not present. Responding to another's words, we must find a phrasing that answers not merely to the other's words but to the other's mind—so the other can draw both from the local scene and from the distal, wider worlds of her or his experience.

("Felicity's Condition," 1983, p. 48)

These lines from Goffman's first book and his last essay may reverse the emphasis on language in the maintenance of social reality, but both were, like all of his writings, preoccupied with a sociology of real social things.

He may not have been as much a Durkheimian as Randall Collins believes, but he did share, as he admits,²⁸ an early enthusiasm for Durkheim. This was, I believe, nothing more than his abiding concern for the work of good sociology. How indeed do social facts arise and sustain themselves? In the face of the social realities that were slowly shifting just below the surface of appearances in the 1950s, Goffman's prescient attentions to these matters, though focused at the exceedingly microscopic, were, as things turned out, very much more enduring than the attentions of Parsons and his followers (as well as those of the soon to emerge cohort of Marxian sociologists) to the most macroscopic. Who today would bet that the best sociology of reality is one that attends primarily to the functional prerequisites of social action (as did Parsons) or to the exhaustive force of class conflict (as did that day's more vulgar Marxists)? Action and class conflict certainly are still important features of social life in the industrial nations, but increasingly their importance must be measured against a prior fact that, in those societies, action is felt to be stymied precisely by the deadlines of tired ways of functioning while the class wars are tangled inextricably in

overlying and undermining struggles arising from ethnic, racial, and sexual differences. It is exactly this once unimaginable coming together of the bureaucratic function of which Weber first warned and a thoroughly countervailing, thus shocking, breaking out of world-encompassing velvet revolutions—revolutions of such vitality that even political conservatives may long for the good old days when the only overt conflict was that between the classes. Those in power today know very well how to break unions and marginalize the poor. What leaves them wondering is how to deal with all the many varieties of protest by gays, blacks, and feminists.

Goffman, to be sure, has nothing explicit to say to us about these details of the present situation, though a close reading of him will likely reveal that even in these respects he was ahead of his contemporaries.²⁹ Where, already in the 1950s, he was miles ahead of everyone else was in his fine understanding that reality was not just (as we say all too casually today) "constructed" but constructed by definite, precise, and surprisingly universal social mechanisms—and constructed in ways that can be appreciated only on condition of abandonment of the dogmatic insistence that the reality of social things is a given, as distinct from being part of the fateful action of daily life. Once that dogma is stared down, straight and honestly, then a sociology can begin imaginatively to reconstruct the rules by which people, in their many differences, and by means of their expressive capacities, make social arrangements work on many occasions, if only for a while.

Earlier I referred to Goffman as a televisual genius before the fact, by which I meant that his sociology was, in a certain sense, televisual in spite of the fact that he himself had no explicit social theory of the new medium that came into its own in his lifetime.³⁰ How can this be? First off, consider the unusual style of writing. What Goffman was doing in writing as he did was to create an imaginative form in its own right. He was not attempting, as were many social scientists and other purveyors of the truth of social things, to represent social reality in what he wrote. He was not so much speaking for the reality to which he referred, as speaking in it at a remove. Goffman never sought to situate himself as the teller of the world's truths which is perfectly obvious from the fact that his was a sociology based on the premise that world reality was fragile, changing, uncertain, vulnerable, and always, always mediated. This was the quality of his writing that caught the attention of literary people. Goffman's sociology was a kind of fiction, but a televisual fiction as much as a literary one. As controversial as the thought may be, the still tougher question is: Which kind?

To say that Goffman's sociological form was akin to fiction is not to say that he was uninterested in the nature of social reality. Hardly this. Rather, the idea is that his view of social reality was such that he could write about it in no other way but one that approaches fiction. This is a more simple proposition than at first it must seem. There are but two choices in the

matter. Those who think of the social world as *ultimately* (if not immediately) coherent, stable, and waiting to be discovered are relatively free to think of their research and writing as the vehicle by which world reality is conveyed. Alternately, those who think of the social world as a more tricky, sometimes thing are less free to indulge in realism. It is all too easy to forget that "reality" is little more than a proposition about the nature of things. One can live happily without ever questioning the proposition, but those who make it their business to ask such questions must eventually ask: Which reality?—the confident kind?—or the tricky one? Both are attitudes worthy of respect. Goffman was among those who chose the latter, as did Sigmund Freud, Max Weber in his more gloomy moments, Marcel Proust, and Oprah Winfrey. Others, including Emile Durkheim, Karl Marx, Charles Dickens, and Kevin Costner, chose the former, more confident one. Either can be entertaining and informative. It is a choice, however, and a choice that determines how a sociologist or any other person charged with similar interpretative responsibilities will write, speak, and otherwise present to others what they think is going on.

So, though Goffman believed in the tricky kind of world, he believed in reality. And, though he was a sociologist, he was a literary one for reason of what he believed about reality. But, still, the question remains: What kind of fiction is this, and in what sense is it televisual?

In arguing that everyday activity provides an original against which copies of various kinds can be struck, the assumption was that the model was something that could be actual and, when it was, would be more closely enmeshed in the ongoing world than anything modeled after it. However, in many cases, what the individual does in serious life, he does in relationship to cultural standards established for the doing and for the social role that is built up out of such doings. Some of these standards are addressed to the maximally approved, some to the maximally disapproved. The associated lore itself draws from the moral traditions of the community as found in folk tales, characters in novels, advertisements, myth, movie stars and their famous roles, the Bible, and other sources of exemplary representation. So everyday life, real enough in itself often seems to be a laminated adumbration of a pattern or model that is itself a typification of quite uncertain real status. (A famous face who models a famous-name dress provides in her movements a keying, a mock-up, of an everyday person walking about in everyday dress, something, in short, modeled after actual wearings; but obviously she is also a model for everyday appearance-while-dressed, which appearance is, as it were, always a bridesmaid but never a bride.) Life may not be an imitation of art, but ordinary conduct, in a sense, is an imitation of the properties, a gesture at the exemplary

forms, and the primal realization of these ideals belongs more to make-believe than to reality.

(Frame Analysis, 1974, p. 562)³¹

In this passage amid his summary of *Frame Analysis* Goffman makes clear just what he thought of reality and the expressive means by which it is sustained. However much what is real may be an original, we copy as we conduct our personal affairs, and that which we copy is itself a transformation (that is, a keying), or make-believe, or simulation of the real we copy. Mothers who mother as their mothers mothered them are mothering after an imaginary recollection.³² Mothering in this sense is make-believe in just the same way as a teenage boy wears the shoes of Michael Jordan as a way of keying up a sense of social status against the one with which he must live. And so on. There is very little that goes on in daily life that is not, in some basic sense, at least a fabrication of what we imagine we ought to be or do in such and such a situation. Fabrications and their variants are, in effect, all we have to guide us in Goffman's view. In this sense Goffman was still a Durkheimian. Societies are, fundamentally, collective representations. In no other way can they be *sui generis*. We are and do what we are and do by playing against the reality presented to us, which plays are provided from collective representations or what can be called, at some risk of misunderstanding, culture. The only other way to think about this is to assume we are provided with certain automatic faculties (let us call them, for want of a better term, *roles*) that signal how and what he ought to think and do given the reality presented. For a long while sociologists took seriously this overly realistic (and overly socialized) view of human conduct. Fewer do today because it entails the assumption that the reality of the world is neat, available, and kind—an assumption hard to sustain in the face of the evening news.

More than any of his interpreters, even more than Fredric Jameson, Patricia Clough has gotten Goffman's relation to reality right, and its effect of his writing style. "Since the 'actual' is always already framed," says Clough, "as the 'real' and in such a way that makes keying and fabrication probable, the kind of rereading suggested by Goffman's writings is a matter of grasping simulations in terms of each other, as if a typology of simulations were possible."³³ What matters in reading Goffman is most importantly, his view of reality as always mediated in this way, always displaced; from which derives his distinctive way of writing, which in turn led him to his linguistic turn. He wrote more and more reflexively about talk and language as the years went by because, as I have said, he surely understood what was going on in the world and how it demanded such a view of the nature of things.

But how does this make Goffman televisual? And why bother with the allusion? Certainly many of Goffman's most appreciative readers have been

put off by the later books, especially *Frame Analysis*. Norman Denzin effectively broke with him because of the structuralism in that book³⁴ and others, like Fredric Jameson, who much respected its semiotic turn, were just as critical of its "structuralist ideology,"³⁵ as were others. It is surely true that *Frame Analysis* was one of Goffman's intellectually least successful efforts because, at the least, it was, even for him, so extraordinarily messy. But fortunately he eventually came back to his literary sensibilities in *Forms of Talk* (the book that so enchanted the literary critics) and in the last two essays, especially "Felicity's Condition."

Here, in "Felicity's Condition," Goffman develops his view of social reality and its necessary relation to talk. The essay offers itself as a highly technical (which it is) disquisition on a most important issue in the sociolinguistics of conversation. Drawing upon, but moving beyond, speech act theory, Goffman advances the argument that was already well-formulated in *Forms of Talk*. Conversation works not through the utterances presented in turns of talk so much as through the ability of speakers to tolerate presuppositions. Talk is not clear. Or, we might say, ordinary language in spoken conversation does not tell the truth of the speakers as such (to say nothing of the truth of the world). Conversation involves an endless number of pauses, questions, breaks, uncertain points. And even when its language is clear, utterances are never complete in themselves. Talk relies heavily on presuppositions, as in one of Goffman's examples: "What did you think of the movie last night?" which presumes that the movie scheduled actually ran, that Mary actually attended it, that John is in a state of relation to Mary that permits the asking of the question, and much more. None of this is conveyed by the words themselves. Yet, the words depend on it all and, amazingly, conversation works most of the time. It does because, as Goffman says in the lines at the end of the essay: "Whatever else, our activity must be addressed to the other's mind, that is, to the other's capacity to read our words and actions for evidence of our feelings, thoughts, and intent. This confines what we say and do, but it also allows us to bring to bear all the world to which the other can catch allusions."³⁶ In other words, even in conversation we are forced beyond that which appears to be the primary surface of meaning, the utterances themselves. We must address not an other's words, but their mind, their capacity to understand what is going on. But this is not a mind-to-mind interaction, rather it is one mediated, as he says, by a shared capacity to "bear all the world to which the other can catch allusions."

Thus, a conversation builds up a fund of matters that can be referred to succinctly, providing one of the reasons why we are inclined to "fill in" a latecomer. The problem, then, is that one passages by degree from what can be taken to be in immediate consciousness to what can be more or less readily

recalled thereto, the given changing gradually to the recallable. . . . Further, when one turns from brief interchanges to, say, longish narratives, the locater format becomes somewhat complicated. Instead of laying the groundwork with one utterance ("Ya remember Harry?"), the narrator may feel that a whole informational prologue must be provided before hearers will be able to properly follow along with the unfolding drama and properly frame described events. . . . And, of course, within the narrative frame, characters in the replayed events will provide us through their reported utterances with embedded examples of the new and the given, which in fact cannot quite function that way for us listeners; for we, in information state terms, are situated at a higher level. We are situated as listeners to the teller's story, not as listeners to the utterances of characters in the teller's story.

("Felicity's Condition," 1983, p. 14)

Just as life is a copy of an original we imagine, so talk proceeds by the ability of those who speak to each other to imagine the worlds in the other's minds and to compose utterances or narratives that speak or attend, not to what is said about what was said, but to what our conversational partner is meaning to say. Talk, thus, is like reality. Both require attention less to what is, or is said, than to the imaginary worlds: that is, to the worlds we copy in our attempts to sustain reality, to the worlds into which we are invited when others speak to us as though we were thoroughly sane. This is the felicitous condition upon which, Goffman proposes, talk and social reality depend.

★

If you still wonder why read Goffman today, then ask yourself how you, and others you know, work in the world as it is. If all your relations are primary, all your data are clear and clean, all your news thoroughly trustworthy just as it is told you, then Goffman is not for you. If, contrariwise, there is a telephone ringing, a stereo playing, or television running itself off somewhere in your neighborhood, perhaps in your place; and, if you have been brought up out of the place of your reading to attend to some interruption that required attention to another's world, so different at the moment from that to which you are attending; and, if you believe the world, in the larger sense of the word, is today one in which the moral discord, social depression, and mediated intrusions are the working stuff of lively social participation, then Goffman is for you.

Goffman may not be for everyone, but his incongruous relation to his times nearly a half-century ago explain why so many of his writings are congruent with the reality most of us face today, whether we like it or not.

Notes

- 1 Anthony Giddens, "Goffman As a Systematic Social Theorist," in Paul Drew and Anthony Wooton, eds., *Erving Goffman* (Polity Press, 1988), chapter 9.
- 2 William Gamson, "Goffman's Legacy to Political Sociology," *Theory and Society*, 14 (1985): pp. 605-22.
- 3 Pierre Bourdieu, "Erving Goffman, Discoverer of the Infinitely Small," *Theory, Culture and Society*, 2 (1983): pp. 112-13.
- 4 Randall Collins, "The Passing of Intellectual Generations: Reflections on the Death of Erving Goffman," *Sociological Theory*, 4:1 (1986): p. 109.
- 5 Norman Denzin and Charles Keller, "Frame Analysis Reconsidered," *Contemporary Sociology*, 10:1 (1981): pp. 52-60.
- 6 Gary Marx, "Role Models and Role Distance," *Theory and Society*, 13 (1984): pp. 649-61.
- 7 See Alasdair Macintyre, "The Self as Work of Art," *New Statesman* (28 March 1969), p. 447, for "brilliant"; and idem, *After Virtue* (University of Notre Dame Press, 1981), pp. 31-2 for the "cultural loss" idea. Macintyre, in effect, reads Goffman as giving up on the self and thus giving up on this staple of modernity. On this see Karl Scheibe, *Self Studies* (Praeger, 1995), p. 51.
- 8 Alan Bennett, "Cold Sweat," *London Review of Books* (15 October-4 November 1981), p. 12; reprinted in idem, *Writing Home* (Faber and Faber, 1994), pp. 302-3.
- 9 "Cold Sweat," ibid.; *Writing Home*, p. 303.
- 10 "Cold Sweat," p. 13; *Writing Home*, p. 311.
- 11 On "but, of course," and similar locutions, see Christopher Ricks, "Phew! Oops! Oof!" in *The New York Review of Books* (July 16, 1981), p. 42. I confess to my own use of such expressions after Goffman or, better put, an inability to resist using them when writing of him.
- 12 Christopher Ricks, "Phew! Oops! Oof!" p. 42.
- 13 Karl Scheibe, *Self Studies* (Praeger, 1995), p. 50.
- 14 Dell Hymes, "On Erving Goffman," *Theory and Society*, 13 (1984): p. 630.
- 15 Clifford Geertz, *Local Knowledge* (Basic Books, 1983), p. 34 I owe this point to Tom Burns, *Erving Goffman* (Routledge, 1992), p. 3.
- 16 Charles Lemert, *Sociology After the Crisis* (Harper Collins, 1995).
- 17 Jacques Derrida (trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak), *Of Grammatology* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1974), p. 158.
- 18 For a discussion see Patricia Clough, *End(s) of Ethnography* (Sage, 1992), chapter 6.
- 19 For a discussion see William Gamson, "Goffman's Legacy to Political Sociology," *Theory and Society*, 14 (1985), especially p. 606.
- 20 For "empiricist," see "A Reply to Denzin and Keller," *Contemporary Sociology*, 10:1 (1981): p. 62, where Goffman remarks that the structuralism of Claude Lévi-Strauss runs contrary to "the crude empiricism in which I was raised." For "social psychologist," see Jef Verhoeven, "An Interview With Erving Goffman, 1980," *Research on Language and Social Interaction*, 26:3 (1993): p. 322, where Goffman says "what I am doing is structural Social Psychology."
- 21 Fredric Jameson, "On Goffman's Frame Analysis," *Theory and Society*, 13 (1976): p. 122.
- 22 Alvin Gouldner, *Coming Crisis of Western Sociology* (Basic Books, 1970), pp. 378-90.
- 23 Goffman's long quotation is from Roger Callois, "Unity of Play: Diversity of Games," *Diogenes*, No. 19 (1957), p. 99.
- 24 On Elvis see Peter Guralnick, *Last Train to Memphis: The Rise of Elvis Presley* (Little, Brown and Company, 1994), pp. 337-8.
- 25 See *The New York Times* (September 5, 1995), especially p. A15.

- 26 For a particularly disheartening instance of the left anxiety with the new cultural theories, see Todd Gitlin, *The Twilight of Common Dreams: Why America is Wracked by Culture Wars* (Henry Holt, 1995).
- 27 See Ryszard Kapuscinski, *Imperium* (Vintage Books, 1994).
- 28 "An Interview with Erving Goffman, 1980," pp. 325-8.
- 29 One example is that by the late 1950s Goffman had already carefully read Simone de Beauvoir's feminist classic, *The Second Sex* (first published 1949, published in the USA 1953), one of the most often cited works in *The Presentation of Self*, and a work the sociological establishment ignored (and ignores) altogether.
- 30 One example of just how puny his *explicit* theory of television was is the meager notice he gives it in *Frame Analysis*, p. 550.
- 31 In the use of the phrase "realm status" Goffman cites Alfred Schutz, "Symbol, Reality and Society," *Collected Papers*, vol. 1 (Martinus Nijhoff, 1962), p. 328.
- 32 As Nancy Chodorow explained not long after *Frame Analysis*, in *Reproduction of Mothering* (University of California Press, 1978).
- 33 Patricia Ticineto Clough, *The End(s) of Ethnography* (Sage, 1992), pp. 108-9.
- 34 See Norman Denzin and Charles Keller, "Frame Analysis Reconsidered," *Contemporary Sociology*, 10:1 (1981): pp. 52-60.
- 35 "On Goffman's *Frame Analysis*," *Theory and Society*, 13 (1976): p. 130.
- 36 "Felicity's Condition," p. 511.