

INVITED REVIEW

Erving Goffman at 100: A Chameleon Seen as a Rorschach Test within a Kaleidoscope

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The 100th anniversary of Erving Goffman's birth was in 2022. Drawing on his work, the Goffman archives, the secondary literature, and personal experiences with him and those in his university of Chicago cohort, I reflect on some implications of his work and life, and the inseparable issues of understanding society. This paper seeks to make some sense of the highly varied, often conflicting, characterizations of Goffman. He was the ultimate Rorschach test in a kaleidoscope, ever ready to be turned (or turning himself) to a different angle, which, even then, does not guarantee that observers will draw the same conclusions. I identify 14 contrasting characterizations of his work (e.g., map maker-theorist/hypothesizer; structure functionalist-symbolic interactionist; conservative-liberal; outsider-insider) and note ways of connecting, or at least making sense of, diverse perspectives. I explore two of the categories—politics and outsider-insider—in detail and discuss an appendix on sociology of information issues involving privacy and publicity with respect to intellectual biography.

Keywords: Goffman, politics, marginality, presentation of self, frame, surprise, unintended consequences, irony

Let all men know thee but no man know thee thoroughly.

Benjamin Franklin

Be liked and you will never want.

Willy Loman (Arthur Miller)

Find it estranging even if not very strange,

Hard to explain even if it is the custom,

Hard to understand even if it is the rule,

Observe the smallest action, seeming simple,

With mistrust ...

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*We particularly ask you –
When a thing continually occurs –
Not on that account to find it natural.*

Bertolt Brecht

INTRODUCTION

Erving Goffman expressed gratitude to his mentor Everett Hughes, “for giving us the conceptual framework we would later live off of” (Jaworski 2000, p. 7). I second that emotion as applied to Goffman on the 100th anniversary of his birth! This article is part of a project seeking to make sense of six decades of studying information control issues inspired by Professor Goffman when I took his Berkeley class in 1961.¹

Goffman offers us *the ultimate Rorschach test in a kaleidoscope, ever ready to be turned (or like a chameleon turning itself) to a different angle*. In the best symbolic interaction arena, observers have room to draw varied conclusions. Drawing on his work, the Goffman archives,² the secondary literature, and personal experiences with him and his university of Chicago cohort, I reflect on some implications of his work and life and the inseparable issues of understanding society.

Table 1 identifies 14 contrasting characterizations (e.g., map maker-theorist/hypothesizer; structure functionalist-symbolic interactionist; conservative-liberal; outsider-insider). I note ways of connecting, or at least making better sense of these diverse perspectives. I explore two of the categories—liberal-conservative and outsider-insider—in detail and provide an appendix on some issues in biography and privacy.

Simmel (2010, p. 160) writes that his own impact would be like, “a cash legacy divided among many heirs, and each converts his share into whatever business suits his nature ...” So it is with Goffman’s legacy, which adaptively and expansively splays across intertwined questions, levels, and disciplines. He moved from being a stranger in a strange land to a somewhat assimilated colonizer and discoverer of far-flung new lands.

He was a man on a mission to chart the relatively autonomous, under-conceptualized field of the *interaction order*. This transcendent order and its control mechanisms went beyond government, organizations, and groups as well as other differentiating factors such as class, gender, age, and place. To understand the interaction order required naturalistically and qualitatively studying the processes and structures of co-present interaction. In doing this he imported from, and exported to, the fields of ethology and communications (broadly defined). While he focused on literal, face-to-face contact, often in public and semi-public places, the space for analysis has been exponentially expanded by contemporary border busting communication and surveillance technologies.

Life is short and the shelf life of scholarly careers is even shorter. In that regard, Goffman stands out. He last published more than four decades ago, yet his resonance and his lessons, puzzles, paradoxes, and complexities echo more strongly today than

TABLE 1. Some Multitudinous Characterizations of Erving Goffman

Scientist	Humanist				
Map maker	Theorist/hypothesizer				
Structuralist	Functionalist	Deconstructionist			
Social anthropologist	Median social psychologist	Hughesian Urban Ethnographer			
Symbolic Interactionist	Ethnomethodologist	Existentialist			
Ethologist	Ecologist	Social Linguist	Semiotician	Cybernetician	Systems Analyst
Biological, Physical Environmental, Social determinist	Free will/agency/voluntarism Indeterminist Misogynist	Feminist			
Moralist	Immoralist	Amoralist	Egoist	Communalist	
Optimist	Pessimist				
Dramaturgist	Comedian	Tragedian			
Apolitical	Anarchist	Conservative	Liberal		
Outsider	Insider	Peripheralist	Centralist		

ever. Dmitri Shalin (2023) documents his continuing scholarly impact across so many disciplines, topics, and countries.³

Beyond the transcendence of his gifts, originality, and the universality of the human forms and processes he problematized, his continuing relevance is accentuated by new technologies that so powerfully extend, and offer alternatives to, physical co-presence and ways of presenting the self and the organization. His approach offers a tether to the sweeping societal changes in personal and public information borders seen between the 19th and 21st centuries. Goffman (1969, p. 7) observed:

during occasions when new industries and technologies are developed, the physical and physiological details usually taken as given can become a matter of concern with consequent clarification of the assumptions and conceptions we have of what individuals are.

Echoing his stylistic and substantive appreciation of George Orwell, Goffman (1963, pp. 57–58) saw that “personal identification of its citizens by the state will increase, even as devices are refined for making the record of a particular individual more easily available to authorized persons and more inclusive of social facts concerning him.”

The prescience of that statement is clear as computerization continues to chip away at the assumptions of normality that previously characterized physical, face-to-face interaction. Technical developments have radically upended established ideas about property, persons, and interaction potentials. Consider changes involving territoriality, distance, visibility, sound, speed, transmission, memorialization, and analytics.

His enduring and expanding relevance today is evident in the colonization of society by social media and AI — with the public relations imperative for persons and organizations to “take charge of their narrative,” but also to be wary of inauthenticity. Whatever the current means of delivery, Facebook, Tik Tok, YouTube, LinkedIn, and others, they have significantly altered ways of presenting the self. Branding is not restricted to bovines.

CACOPHONOUS CHARACTERIZATIONS

In the extensive commentary on Goffman over three decades, we see (often contradictory) critiques of empirical adequacy, logic, and usefulness; efforts to extend his work; and intellectual and social histories that track the influences and contours of the work. We see efforts at social typing him with terms such as bad boy, provocateur, maverick, enigmatic, stranger, risk-taker, hero, detective, and magician (Klapp 2014; Ranci 2021; Scott 2023). In adjectival form these can be applied to his work and also inform the nature and career of a person and their work. Yet, although often difficult to do, they need to be viewed independently as well. The presence of, and tolerance for, so much multiplicity, contradiction, enigma, inconsistency, change, ambiguity, and ambivalence make a strong statement about Goffman and his topics.⁴

The depth of his perceptions often came with melancholy and ambivalence regarding the mixture of good and evil within persons and societies and the limits of our ability to understand, predict, and control. The mixed picture he presented reflects the nature of the social world, as well as his distinctiveness. Goffman is clear and opaque, changeable yet with continuity — but with empirical and logical analysis and intuitive leaps there is understanding to be had. This makes him interesting (Davis 1971)

Whatever his ancestry (or perhaps because of it), Erving Goffman was a quintessential American theorist in the pragmatic tradition of Emerson, James, Dewey, and Mead (Ogien 2022). He had a democratic and egalitarian sensitivity, whether involving skepticism of official lines, privilege, and high-flying abstract claims; or appreciation of commonplace subject matter, the openness and vulnerability of social settings floating on contingency and the ability of humans to creatively negotiate these.

Goffman was a crafty craftsman and a magnificent metaphorician.⁵ His x-ray vision exposed the unacknowledged, or unseen, deeper meanings and structures for social order in the mundane, taken-for-granted interactions of everyday life. As a 1950s Kitty Kallen song proclaimed, “Little Things Mean a Lot.” In the same way, highly ritualized big things can feel empty and meaningless. By refocusing the lens and following Georg Simmel, who lurks large (if largely camouflaged) in the background, Goffman’s mapping revealed similarities within things that seem different and differences within things that seem similar.

The laser-like precision and evocative richness of his concepts and illustrations are central to his insights and impact. He provided compelling examples not as proof, but rather to almost precognitively orient the reader, often with “aha” moments in the

waiting. Here he “... ties together bits of experience the reader has already had” (Goffman 1959, p. xxii). He is comfortable in viewing us all (including beginning graduate students as he told us in class) as students of society, even occasionally citing student term papers.

Yet beyond the allure of his compelling examples, language, and some reliance on “the informal memories of colorful people” (Goffman 1959, p. xi), there is a broader, more systematic approach and goal that separates social analysis from literary art. His sheltering concepts bring unity to examples from diverse settings. This illustrates the universality of interaction forms as “ours to study *sub-specie aeternitatis*” (Goffman 1983a, 1983b, p. 7). Just as sparks appear when a piece of flint strikes steel, with the *emergent* interaction of two persons, the whole exceeds the sum of the separate parts. Yet tiny sparks can cause massive forest fires, and micro-level interactions can impact macro-level patterns.

He works the empirical, minutia mines for what they say about more general social forms (a study of gambling is about risk-taking, of children on a merry-go-round about role attachment, of a mental institution about ideological obfuscation and legitimation). He had the courage to swim upstream in cloudy waters abundant with sharks. After so much has been written (421,953 citations in Google Scholar as of the end of 2023) only the intrepid, over-confident, retired scholar with no reputation left to lose would claim to offer something new, at least not without a note from their mother.⁶ I have read only a small number of these and recall even fewer.⁷ Trying to be comprehensive, or even representative, in referencing is a fool’s errand. After so much has been said, my conclusions are neither fresh nor novel. However, after 60+ years in the show and watch business, they feel right.

Some of the terms in the table are binary, such as qualitative-quantitative, others represent oppositional continua such as from liberal to conservative. Others co-exist as subtle variations within a general topic such as interpretive sociology (symbolic interaction, ethnomethodology, existentialism). They may be used as nouns or adjectives and can refer to personal characteristics and/or to the work itself.

A well-developed, secondary literature, cited here, offers critiques, extensions and homages as in this article. Observers markedly disagree about what it is that he says. Even with agreement, they may disagree about its meaning and merit. Five commonly occurring types of response to Goffman are:

1. historical and social locators and explicators with respect to what influenced Goffman and where he fits (Jaworski 2022a, 2023a, 2023b; Shalin [forthcoming](#));
2. concept, theory, and empirical extenders — by far the largest category (Aranda, Helms, and Hudson 2023; Brensinger and Eyal 2021; Tavory and Fine 2020);
3. keepers of another faith (criticism of him for not being faithful to, ignoring or misusing the critic’s game — whether theoretical, methodological, political, disciplinary, comparative, or level of analysis) (Denzin and Keller 1981, Gouldner 1970). Here also are slayers of the father (fewer perhaps because Goffman had relatively few students);
4. keepers of his faith who are often critics of the other faith-keepers just above;

5. “name droppers” — offering guilt or validation by association, who use something from Goffman to add legitimacy to their own unrelated marketing concerns.

The primal sociology of knowledge questions here are how the characteristics, contexts, and settings of the scholar being analyzed condition his or her work and how those of the scholar, who is doing the analyzing, condition what they conclude. As well, it would be good to study how characterizations of Goffman have changed over the last seven decades and what their sociology and psychology of knowledge correlates are (e.g., the spread of his work so far beyond sociology and which aspects spread and where).

Each of the Table 1 categorizations requires separate analysis. If I was not approaching the proverbial four score and 7 years of age, I would be tempted to pursue each, but I am, and thus will settle here for treating only the liberal-conservative and the insider-outsider descriptions. But first, what are we to make of the panoply of ways of considering him and his work? With a tongue in cheek reference to the complexities of interpretation (Garfinkle 1967), “Who was he really?” [*sic*].

We need to consider several things here — what he *says* about his work and about social science more broadly; what he *does*; and how *others* label that and view the work’s impact. Those do not necessarily sing in harmony.

Goffman said conflicting things about his work, and he warned us to be skeptical of authors and critics. He would likely have viewed the voluminous efforts to classify his approach and to unpack his work with distaste and bemusement. Consider what he said about the dramaturgy concept applied to his early work: “the term dramaturgy I can’t take all that seriously” (Verhoeven 1993, p. 321). Better to mint new empirical data than to discourse on other people’s articles and books. He did not take kindly to exegesis or writing books about other books; *Bücher über Bücher schreiben* (Winkin 2022b, p. 164). He wrote only three book reviews (one in 1955 and two in 1957) and those were at the start of his career. He ignored reviews and critiques of his own work⁸ — an exception is his rejoinder in *Contemporary Sociology* (Goffman 1981c, pp. 60–68) to Denzin and Keller (1981).

He had the distance, and perhaps courage, to apply the labeling perspective not only to elites, but to the home team. Labelers have their own interests and impose conceptual borders after the fact. Why should we believe them? He saw labeling a scholar’s work and dividing it into professional categories as somewhat accidental, a historical, exclusionary, and unduly determinative. He would have been supportive of his student Dean MacCannell’s (Aphchain and MacCannell 2023) observation that there should be “... no place for schools of thought in research and scholarship. They only serve to enable stagnation. Those with ‘paradigms to grind’ and views to promote have a ‘stilted sense of social reality’ that can move away from scholarly dialogue to ‘theological or political denunciation’” (Goffman 1981c, pp. 68, 61). He writes:

One proclaims one’s membership in some named perspective, gives pious mention of its central texts, and announces that the writer under review is all off by

virtue of failing to qualify for membership. A case of guilt by pigeonholing. As if a writer's work is a unitary thing and can be all bad because he or she does not apparently subscribe to a particular doctrine, which doctrine, if subscribed to, would somehow make writings good. (Goffman 1981c, p. 61)

However cozy, too tight an identification with the discipline (and, even worse, one strand of it) could be blinding, and even boring, after a few decades in the biz. Labels not only can hide unholy power differences, but also run the risk of oversimplification, reification, and an expired shelf life. Goffman was suspicious of labels, ideology, loyalty tests, and institutions (whether total or merely greedy). Furthermore, when the labels come with the visible and/or self-imposed strings of the sponsors, it can be hard to sustain scholarship in the “spirit of unfettered, unsponsored inquiry” he strongly advocated and lived (Goffman 1983a, p. 17).

None-the-less, as Henry James observed in his short story “The Middle Years,” “we work in the dark. We do what we can. We give what we have.” So here goes. The varied and often discordant views of his persona and work illustrate the multiple faces of social inquiry and society. Didier Eribon (1991, p. 173), a Foucault biographer, described the philosopher as, “a complex, many-sided character,” where “under one mask there is always another.” The same might have been said of Goffman.

The Rorschach test has an external, objective quality with determined borders and inkblots on white cards. These are available to the sighted. But with the interpretative question of what the image shows an observer and what is said about it, we encounter another kind of datum. Both the chameleon and the kaleidoscope involuntarily change appearance as the external setting changes. At any given moment both have factual, external qualities that are constant until there is a change. The response of nonhuman organisms in the presence of the chameleon (if they can sense it) is largely automatic without reflective, aligning concerns such as humans wondering, “what’s up?,” “what’s going on?,” “are you for real?”

Humans, of course, also involuntarily and automatically respond to the external environment through instinct, biology, perhaps archetypical or soulful residues, the unconscious, and various forms of unwillful or purportedly unwillful leakage. But humans — in the best of existential voluntarism, have a degree of choice in what they present and in how they respond to what others present. That choice, whatever its degrees of freedom, brings a personal morality into the picture which can be fogged up by the powerful forces of social locations, cultural beliefs, and experiences.

Goffman in his work and life was more chameleon and secretive than most scholars and he was masterful at turning his kaleidoscope for varied takes on “what was up” as context, time, and he himself changed.

WHO OR WHAT WAS HE “REALLY”?

“Who are YOU?” said the Caterpillar.

*Alice: “I-I hardly know, sir, just at present
at least I know who I WAS when I got up*

*this morning, but I think I must have changed
several times since then."*

Lewis Carroll

What to make of the contrasting, and even polarized categories in Table 1? Conflicting, even diametrically opposed views are found in both the academic literature and the personal reminiscences of the archives. I would prefer not to have a pony in the "but what was he really?" race, other than to place bets widely.

Is the lack of clarity or unanimity because some characterizations in the table are clearly wrong? A given answer may involve a bad sample, looking in the wrong place using the wrong yardstick, an atypical example/illustration, a misreading or bad faith propagation of ideas the spreader knows to be inaccurate. It can mean his (or his critics) being unclear about whose voice is being heard — the actor, others in the situation, or the author as reportorial observer or commentator.

Perhaps it may simply be selective perception — as Paul Simon sings in "The Boxer," "a man hears what he wants to hear and disregards the rest." A conclusion might be nothing more than wish fulfillment under the sway of the blindness of subfield disciplinarity or ideology, or cognitive, memory, and ethical deficits of the claimer. If it is selective perception there might be a partial, a contextual, but minor truth involving low hanging fruit, a different level of analysis, a different problem, or changes within the same body of work or at different stages of his or a topic's career.

We see weaving and ducking in the same ring — note the varied meanings of the term "self" employed in *Presentation*. In 1959, Goffman writes, "The self ... is not an organic thing that has a specific location, whose fundamental fate is to be born, mature, to die; it is a dramatic effect arising diffusely from a scene that is presented" (Goffman 1959, p. 252). But earlier he suggests something more stolid beneath the veneer, "the degree that the individual maintains a front before others that he himself does not believe, he can come to experience a special kind of alienation from *self* and a special kind of wariness of others" (Goffman 1959, p. 229). The implication here is that the self is present prior to emerging from "a scene that is presented." That must be the case if the disjuncture in conning the audience is to generate unease within the actor. The same sense of a singular, self-identifying person beyond or behind the public offering is clearly expressed in the concept of role distance (Goffman 1961b).⁹

In another *Presentation* example, Philip Manning (1988) observes that, between the 1956 and 1959 versions of the book, greater emphasis is given to rituals and the objective and less to the individual as a secret manipulator. Alan Dawe (1973) notes a marked change of tone and content between the last chapter in *Relations in Public* on "Normal Appearances" and what came before. There is a move from the minor infractions, jokes, wit, jesting, and rituals of integration and re-integration in the first parts of the book to a darker suspicion and fear of the severe and threatening disruptors that might be waiting beyond the masks and lurk lines — a concern well captured in *Henry IV*: "I speak of peace, while covert enmity under the smile of safety wounds the world" (Act 1, line 9).

His treatment of gender underwent significant changes after several decades. His handling of gender and sexism, as seen in his 1976 and 1977 works (Goffman 1976; Goffman 1977), differs in content and tone from his earlier writing, as he moved from a typical young, 1950s, flirtatious white guy to a middle-aged crypto-feminist. His views on mental illness softened considerably from *Asylums* (Goffman 1961a) to “The Insanity of Place” (Goffman 1971).

Goffman makes a strong case for how hard individuals often work to be in congruence with, and helpful to others. Yet he also shows how they do the opposite. The playful, subtle, contrary, mercurial Goffman as a slipper and a slider, sometimes may purposefully mislead the observer; or what is intended as satire or humor may be taken literally; or what is intended as neither may be misconstrued, and endlessly debated, because certainty resides more in the faith of the observer than in the proof of the data.

What, for example, should we make of his (Goffman 1967) entitling a paper on gambling “Where the Action Is”? Is it “alienating” because it reflects “patriarchal experience” as Deegan (2014, p. 77) argues? Or, in a more positive light, is it an example of hyper-masculinity against the backdrop of an America going even softer since the 1950s (Scheff 2006)? Or is the term intended to call attention to the concrete *interaction* order in opposition to Talcott Parsons’ abstract use of the term *action* as part of a formal theory (Shalin 2016)? Does it reflect Goffman’s role distance from the staid and safe role of the professor (Lyng 2004)? Or is it nothing more than vernacular for gambling activity? Do we have to choose? It is helpful here to separate out an author’s intention (however elusive and multitudinous it can be) from its impact on other readers and the world more broadly.

As with the subtlety of great art and scholars who write about frames and definitions of situations and those performing within them, a lot (but not everything) is in the eye and experience of the beholder (it’s in the taste buds not in the pudding!). Who does the beholder want Goffman to be? By what means is he to be understood? Those questions are particularly relevant to the markedly different memoirist accounts found in the Goffman archives. These should be seen as accounts that are (assuming good faith) meaningful to the memorialist (Cavan 2011), while considering the limits imposed by memory, selective perception and axe-grinding. From another vista, conflicting stories are themselves the (or a) story. Here we need to ask, “what does an account say about the person offering the account?” as well as the person encountering it.

Story tellers need to be heard, but the radical relativism of sacralizing the subjective cannot fully stand. Just because all are stories, does not mean that all stories are equal; the same holds for performances or anything that is constructed. To varying degrees, stories have attributes and build from something. Central to understanding a life and work in drawing from conflicting perspectives and memories is figuring out the interplay of the external and verifiable with elements of the subjectivity and experience of the author, the claimant presenting And the audience. Separating performance from content, per se, can help in doing this, even as sometimes

the performance offers vital content and can be an important the symbolic or literal message.

PERFORMANCE GOES BEYOND WORDS

We've got to learn to love appearances.

Leonard Cohen

Understanding Goffman requires going beyond the written word. The emotional wallop of his work, along with what Stan Lyman (1973, p. 362) calls his “artfulness,” transcends analytic understanding. It is partly grasped by being experienced. Novelist Flannery O'Connor (1969, p. 96) observed that fiction's meaning lies not in abstract words but in what is felt. That applies to nonfiction stories as well. Understanding can come from thinking about how bits and pieces of one's own life connect to another's accounts and actions,¹⁰ with a bit of *verstehen* and intuition. Goffman, like Simmel, had an uncanny ability to trigger the reader's response, based on a shared culture and human elements that transcend culture.

As Winkin (2022a, 2022b) observes, there was a performative quality to his communication. His presentations resonate at levels beyond substance and cognition. Words can be “performative utterances” (Austin 1962; Gergen 2012) apart from immediate acts. Goffman also “spoke” in behavioral strips in which his actions did the talking. His deadpan facial expressions, his timing, his gestures, and his body language could be artful. What was not said could matter more than what was, if you knew the language.

Here we see another parallel to Simmel for whom, according to observers at the time, “... the process of thought took possession of the whole man, ... the haggard figure on the lecture platform became the medium of an intellectual process the passion of which was expressed not in words only, but also in gestures, movements, actions” and “one doesn't really listen, one participates in the thought processes” Coser (1958, pp. 637–638).

Goffman's offerings could be playful or hostile — as with sometimes in a lecture speaking too softly or rapidly and communicating that he did not care if his audience could hear him or not; stopping his talk when a photographer took his picture; once even getting down from the stage. Or consider breaking expectations by standing too close to a person and saying nothing. The delivery of a paper entitled “The Lecture as Performance” (Goffman 1981b) was itself a performance (when he gave it in Brussels, he showed up late presumably to make a point, Winkin 2022b). Or consider, in a lecture, how he mixed explication and demonstration — he took a sip of water and used that to explain the role of the dramatic pause.

In offerings and responses to others, the literal content of words is not the only form of communication. Goffman helped introduce a more performative sociology with images, music, costumes, physical movement, and even props used in lectures. In recent decades, the ease of showing slides and video excerpts from film and the

news along with the internet have greatly expanded the lecturer's repertoire. His use of images and popular culture was likely informed by his work at the Canadian National Film Board before graduate school.

Beyond the intuitive and experiential elements, answers are helped by the adequacy of the logic, the clarity of the empirical, and by consistency with what is known from other facts and contexts. There is also a guarded (since things can change) consensual, democratic science question, "how many see it that way?" Of course, for some claims there is the pragmatic and usefulness question: "does the plane fly?" Does the pudding taste good? While the pragmatic gives an answer that cannot be avoided, it is morally hazardous, and emotionally constricting, if it is the only standard.¹¹

Just because most of the observers with disparate views are college professors, and some even intellectuals, does not mean that they are stupid. As the little dog Toto knew in *The Wizard of Oz*, there really was something behind the curtain that could be factually known across observers. In broad outline, most turns of the kaleidoscope reveal something empirical. After an exhaustive review, Jacobsen and Kristiansen (2010) conclude that much in the varied accounts of Goffman is valid and sensible. To a degree, to reverse a 1960s Buffalo Springfield song, "nobody's wrong [because] everybody's right."

If Table 1 was on a multiple-choice exam, I would answer "all of the above" and then some — at least sometimes. Yet, as Orwell said in *Animal Farm*, some are more equal than others. While it may be unpopular today to say it is "either/and," — not "either/or," the former response fits best. In addition, at times it will be neither/nor, but rather some third dialectically sparked label because of blending and balancing opposing strands. It could not be otherwise for someone like Goffman who so appreciated Whitehead's fulsome view that every way of seeing is also a way of not seeing, within omnipresent change.

Goffman was deep and very serious about his craft, yet sometimes a mercurial and playful, enigmatic chameleon who changed over time. What then can be said about who he was?

HERE'S THE BEEF (TWO MEANINGS)

The predominant answer in Goffman's own words is he was, "a qualitative, social ethnographer of small-scale entities," a "structural social psychologist" who was "oriented to social anthropology." He worked first with anthropologist Lloyd Warner. Radcliffe Brown (to whom he dedicated *Relations in Public*) "... was central to my interest and concerns — and a model for writing papers much more than any sociologist" (Verhoeven 1993, pp. 323, 321). Yet a bit later in his graduate study he emphasized sociology and drew from Simmel, Mead, Blumer, Hughes, and Shils with turns to urban anthropology, and later sociolinguistics.

He considered himself "... a symbolic interactionist ... But I am also a structural functionalist in the traditional sense" (Verhoeven 1993, p. 318). He brings

them together via his mentor Everett Hughes (Jaworski 2000). This reflects the widely accepted view (at the time anyway) that “functional analysis” was synonymous with sociology, per another of my teachers — Kingsley Davis (1959). Dean MacCannell (1983) observes that in *Frame Analysis*, he presciently draws together existentialism, phenomenology, structuration, and semiotics into an emerging, single theoretical view.

From the social process perspective, actors with their give and take are *doing life* (not to be confused with that expression as applied to those serving long term prison sentences or the fact that with technological constraints the entire society shows increased parallels to a maximum-security prison). Researchers in the symbolic interaction tradition are *doing sociology* by understanding because of *listening, observing, interpreting*, and even *experiencing*. The goal is to grasp what actors who are “on” and/or at the scene are presumed to be inferring, thinking, feeling, believing, and doing. The ethnographer’s descriptive details can be an end in themselves and, if lucky, in their presentation may occasionally even reflect the art and truth found in literature, music, and the visual. The data from this approach are soft, fleeting, alive, and in process. Because this is dynamic, it is challenging to codify; beyond naming. It is sociology by lists and subjective resonance. It catalogues and signals rather than more systematically codifying based on an internal logic.

In contrast, structuralism involves the search for more systematic and formulaic (whether legally or bureaucratically formalized) codes which are imposed on the data by both the actors and researchers. These, in principle, guide behavior and inform expectations. The seemingly local, idiosyncratic details of a given strip of behavior are pigeon-holed into some prior conceptual boxes provided by culture, including micro-cultures unique to the interactants. Both the observed and the observers *frame* the activity. Whatever our role in each moment, we are all in the inference and codification business. Sense-making resides in what the actors and the researcher think is occurring. In doing this, they draw on a limited number of mostly inherited ideas of “what’s happen’ing?,” “what’s the score here?” and “what should be done?” across the observable and inferable. When other people are involved to varying degrees, this involves presumptions made about the actors’ subjectivity.

Structuralism identifies codes or patterns — whether found in the kinship studied by anthropologists, the syntax studied by linguists, or in routine or atypical interactions. Goffman’s sociology by metaphor and satire (Fine and Martin 1990; Jaworski 2022b) belong here as well, as when a given example fits within a more general category or process with which it is not conventionally associated. As noted, he welcomed both approaches. Although he turned more to framing in his later work, the dramaturgical approach which he began with is also illustrative.

His appreciation of universalism or the locational generalizability of forms and concepts is nicely illustrated by Hughes’ (1984, 1992) use of terms such as bastard institutions, dirty work, and stigma. These overlap with their betters, just as their presumed opposites show some of their elements. A central theme in *Asylums* is that

no organization, no matter how seemingly clean, can fully function in conformity with its own norms, nor are there ever any fully unstigmatized individuals.

He considered the external and the internal, the objective and the subjective, structure and process, and stability and change in the traditions of Simmel's formal sociology. As Gregory W.H. Smith (1989, p. 23) writes, he sought, "the structuring principles which provide the order within the flux." He saw structure and process connected in an endless dance, particularly when it involved parties with conflicting interests. But there is also a cooperative dance when parties of good will compete to best serve each other. Settings are also hemmed in by uncontrollable contingencies and background or stage-setting factors within the environment that surrounds them.

His approach was more one of curving than linear lines, as he mixed structure and process, subjectivity and objectivity, continuity and change, control and lack of control, predictability and surprise, fact and concept, and satire and realistic accounts — like a stone seeming to eternally skip across the water touching all, never to have a fixed landing. The variety of potentially conflicting elements inherent in the topic guarantees that ambiguity and ambivalence are ever in waiting, further nourished by the limits on perception and cognition and by deception.

The difference between the endurance and solidity of structures and the fluidity and fragility of process is relative. They are eternally interwoven and reciprocal. The latter change and in their infinite richness, the contexts of process are never exactly the same, despite enduring patterns across varied settings. Consider a basketball game with tools, rules, expectations, and a referee but whose final score and the precise way of reaching it is unknown. Structures are imposed and shape the context, but if the outcome was known in advance, it would not be a game. Out of the creative and adaptive challenges of process and earlier and immediate history, new patterns emerge to structure events. Consider new rules such as the appearance of three-point shots, the need to shoot within a specified time, and new defensive moves.

Even events like publishing an article on a topic presumed to be enduring and scientifically studied can act back on the thing being studied. This can happen as result of the study's impact on subsequent behavior. The original study can become a causal factor impacting later research. This is experimenter impact on a vast scale. It shares something with an interviewer conditioning responses presumed to be "neutral" and independent of the data collection technique. Consider the impact of characterizations by David Riesman, Denny, and Glazer (1956) of the other-directed person or Stanley Milgram's work on obedience to authority. In raising awareness of the dangers of over-conformism, both became events that can influence such behavior in the future.

In his first published paper, Goffman (1951, p. 302) identifies six "general devices" that work against the misuse of social class symbols. But after identifying the thrust to control, he immediately notes its ironic insufficiency and the ever-present opposing thrust to violate in response to, or in anticipation of, potential control: "... there is no single mode of restriction which is not regularly and systematically circumvented in some fashion." This two-step dynamic is a key to his natural history process approach

involving interaction at all levels and the patterned expectations of actors playing their best shots thrashing about within. Here we see the need to attend to the “careers” of individuals and social practices. This dynamic illustrates the interaction of “creative” choices amidst the deterministic, or at least limiting, pressures of structure and culture. With the poet so often “the ceremony of innocence is drowned” as the polluted tide is loosed and rises. Yet, counter forces emerge to draw the tide back.

DISCIPLINED ECLECTICISM

Above all, Goffman was not a one-topic pony.¹² As noted, despite some constancy, he moved back and forth and sideways, in the best dressage tradition. He let the issue drive the method and concept rather than the reverse. He went for the combination plate. He practiced the disciplined eclecticism shown by Robert Merton, listening to all and looking widely, being ever ready to shift stance and not prematurely showing any positivist aces. More than most members of the scribbling classes, he offers readers a very full and complex Rorschach test regarding potential labels.¹³

His work is a kind of half-way house between the literary stylist à la Kafka or Orwell and the ponderous positivist, with the best of both worlds. The essay style gives one a lot of freedom and bang for the buck. Have fun, get to the heart of the matter with surface skimming, colorful examples, satirizing, and being provocative. Here, as with his persona and much of his work, Goffman rocked between the center and periphery (to use the terms of an early mentor Edward Shils).

OUTSIDE, INSIDE, AND IN-BETWEEN

*Clowns to the left of me,
Jokers to the right, here I am,
Stuck in the middle with you,*
Gerry Rafferty

Robert Park (1928), the teacher of some of Goffman’s teachers, popularized the term “the marginal man.” This drew from Simmel’s (1971) treatment of the stranger, a bittersweet social form. As an outsider this social type is often unseen, while seeing what insiders cannot see. The stranger has a kind of double or even triple vision with the added burden of code-switching and perhaps increased stress and neuroses.¹⁴

For Simmel the stranger is a permanent resident but remains a resident alien. Not fully outside, he has a connection to the inside group, but in important ways remains outside of it. He or she is a straddler.¹⁵ While a participant, the stranger experiences more disconnection (less role commitment) and risks rejection relative to “real” insiders. The objective social factors that make him marginal or a stranger can distance and confound his subjectivity relative to that of the natives and add a strong motivation to succeed (at least at learning insider codes).

By his social inheritance Goffman was initially an outsider to the higher reaches of American society, elite institutions, and aspects of post-WWII American identity culture. He wrote, "... in an important sense there is only one completely unblushing male in America, a young, married, white urban, northern, heterosexual, Protestant, father of college education, fully employed of good complexion" [and following *Stigma* able-bodied] (Goffman 1963, p. 128). Contrary to the misreading of many critics he did not automatically favor this culture, he merely described it at that time.

Goffman felt and faced the onslaught of that culture. Yet a note of caution. As the "black is beautiful" movement suggests, those on the outside relentlessly exposed to dominant culture ideals need not always, or only, have a negative self-image, nor fail to see the strengths of their group or of themselves as an individual with multiple sources of identity, nor the weaknesses of the dominant group's ideals.¹⁶ To note issues of self-doubt, and at times wishing to be someone else for all those so relentlessly exposed to dominant images of a cultural ideal with benefits, need not mean full acceptance of insider standards.

Terms such as "the virtual middle class ideal" (Goffman 1963, p. 146), which *Stigma* is based on, are not adequate for a polyglot society in which pluralism (in principle) grants legitimacy to minorities who may have an alternative view of the value given to the dominant group's ideals, and space and resources to challenge them. Much of his work can be read as a paean to the human spirit of resilience, resistance, and creativity, however partial. The resources and will were there for Goffman to become an insider in many ways. This reflects the gnarling, blurring, and exchanging of roles, and aspects of identity, he notes in *Stigma*.

If Goffman were writing today, I am sure the language contrasting the "normal" with so many kinds of stigma would be more qualified — particularly as this relates to lifestyle choices, gender, and ethnicity. There would be more unblushing people. The term "normal," if used at all, would refer to what is statistically common, rather than what is necessarily healthy *à la* a medical model or morally superior. Many traditional invidious status rankings and distinctions and advantages would remain, if weakened. But they would have to make room for alternatives within distinct groups and cultures. That would include the advantages such groups could offer and secondary gains from their outsider status. The question, "says who?" would be more in the forefront. Since the 1960s, many excluded groups have seen an expansion of role models and resources encouraging them to challenge dominant conceptions and their preferred ways.

Yet there are limits. Positive thinking and indomitable will are not enough. Interaction settings and allocated life chances are not a blank page. There are pre-existing borders, costs, and media socialization influences, that limit and partly define what can occur with respect to the creativity of individuals. The actor, as heroic inventor, encounters restrictions in the face of the deadening weight of the social machine. Goffman says, "... I don't think the individual himself or herself does much of the constructing [relative to the perspective argued by symbolic interaction]. He rather comes to a world, already in some sense or other established" (Verhoeven 1993,

p. 324). This is the meaning of his oft cited, “not then, men and their moments. Rather, moments and their men” (Goffman 1967, p. 3) — a misperception he felt called upon to right.

He viewed and appreciated individuals as creative forces acting back against organizational and other machines, bravely facing great odds to become the person they would like to be or seen to be; beyond the identities they are involuntarily provided. But much of the time the individual is only a pawn in the game — drawing on what their culture accidentally provides, even if what is offered is not accidental in a sense of being random. Rather it has a *function* in sustaining, and at times undermining, the game on playing fields that can be unlevel. Society uses and constitutes individuals in order for the show to go on, even as individuals may introduce alterations to the expectations and situations they were handed.

Yet even if inherited cultural dictates can rarely be fully or fundamentally altered, their sociology of knowledge cage can be rattled by the rare scholar standing apart (Jameson 1999). As R.D. Laing (Simon 1992, p. 31) said, “Goffman was such a brilliant frame analyst ... He was someone who was always *outside* things, who could sort of put his frame on whatever was occurring”¹⁷ (that included what he was saying in the moment and the way he was saying it).

What Pierre Bourdieu said about Foucault applies equally to Goffman. His thought involved “a long exploration of transgression, of going beyond social limits, always inseparably linked to knowledge and power” — seeing *through* (Eribon 1991, p. 328). In a personal communication, the late sociologist Dennis Wrong (a friend of Goffman’s since they met in 1944 at the University of Toronto) wrote that even in college Goffman was “a scoffer and a mocker, a ripper aside of the veils and polite fictions we use in interaction to cover the harsher realities of the social world.”

Goffman was called a “smart Alec,” “a character,” and, “a live wire.” He could undercut or overflow whatever convention was believed to frame a situation. Shakespeare’s claim that “[the] best men are molded out of faults, And for the most, become much more the better” (*Measure for Measure* Act 5, Scene1) applies to Goffman.

Was he restless, easily bored because he was so smart, quick, and insightful? Perhaps Goffman also played, teased, punctured, and confounded to keep himself amused and to spark up the scene, apart from any learning tool or deep psychological needs. “Outside” brings a perspective to what is experienced inside and the ability to see beyond taken-for-granted frames. Goffman was bestride and traveled freely between the inside and the outside and his distinctive side.

His relationship with insiders was ambivalent, reflecting and in some ways appreciating the hegemony of the dominant culture (whether across society or within institutions and specific organizations, yet feeling distinct from them and it). He was aware of the ways experts (of whatever coloration) could be effective because of their knowledge and experience but could misuse their position. Their location gave them cover to self-serve, to be unfair and cruel. He was forever caught in the throes of ambivalence and ambiguity offered by the society of irony integrated, but also torn

apart, by conflicting values and temptation. He never had a smooth landing. But the turbulence kept him fresh, alive, ever fueled, and creative. As a metaphysician he was in a state of permanent role distance.

In my 1961 class Goffman mentioned the writer and critic Anatole Broyard. He is the subject of Chandler Brossard's (1962) novel *Who Walk in Darkness*. Shape shifting, racially ambiguous, and ambivalent, Broyard's intriguing double (and more) life is chronicled by his daughter Briss (Broyard 2008). Broyard was noncommittal or evasive about what Goffman (1963, pp. 63–64). termed his “social identification” in contrast to his “personal identification.”

The Brossard book's title is from *Isaiah* 50:10. It is not clear if the title refers to the secrecy and/or self-delusion of the protagonist, the audiences he dupes, or both. The book is about a middle-class writer drawn to the underside of Greenwich Village life. In the novel a friend asks him, what is this,

“... about you being the Arrow Collar underground man?” “That's what I am,” I said laughing a little, “partly underground.” Do you think you will ever go all the way? (p. 90)

The question is not only will he, but how far does he want to go and is he able to? It is not surprising that Goffman recommended this book. It speaks to his own situation (and indeed to everyone's to varying degrees) in being the observing, but unseen outsider immersed in scenes with diverse expectations and varying degrees of “*chez moi*” and prideful or less resonance. The novel's character is aware of his duality. Like the novel's protagonist, Goffman manages his marginality.

For him it was other kinds of marginality (immigrant, somewhat rural, Canadian, Eastern European Jewish, upwardly mobile, doing a less valued type of work [regarding both method and subject matter] on the fringes of a lesser discipline). He clearly expresses his early sense of outsidership in telling his colleague Dell Hymes (1984, p. 628), “I grew up (with Yiddish) in a town where to speak another language was to be suspect of being a homosexual.” He did not embrace the more tribal and religious aspects of his social identity. He was, at least initially, like the stranger Paul Simon sang about (“You Can Call Me Al”; Katz 2010),

A man walks down the street
It's a street in a strange world
Doesn't speak the language ...
He holds no currency ...

The man in the song asks, “who will be my role model?” Strangers can be fast learners, even as they stand on quivering ground. Goffman quickly learned the language and his currency appreciated. With respect to Jewish identity, from the perspective offered by Cuddihy (1975), Goffman, like other outsiders such as Marx, Freud, and Levi-Strauss, looked for what is true about the human condition and therefore inclusive of all humans. In this setting of uneven genteel universality (informed by gentile,

Protestant culture) Jewish tribal identity loses significance, if not fully disappearing into faceless secularism. Here, Goffman contrasts with Simmel. Given anti-Semitism, Simmel (although baptized) remained a stranger to the insider world of the German university and its higher reaches. This led him to go his own way in generating alternative audiences as (what now would be called) a public intellectual (Coser 1958).

Lenny Bruce, a comedian much admired by Goffman (Scott 2010), said, “If you live in New York, you’re Jewish; even if you are not.”¹⁸ The same might be said of Goffman’s cohort at the University of Chicago, even when they were not, as with Dennis Wrong, William Westley and others. His outsider ethnic background connects with his sociology and his work in several ways — as a cautious outsider attuned to hurts and slights; rationalism; universalism; cosmopolitan; a voracious reader; ambitious; a wry ironic, telling it-like-it-is view of the world; and through his put down, contentious, if somewhat friendly double edged, humor (*à la* the game the dozens). Being acerbic can be the armor of the insecure even as it can also deliver social insight and a bit of relief.

Gary Jaworski (2022b, 2023b) has traced the background sources of Goffman’s righteously critical satire and humor to British and US popular books and shows. Jaworski (2023a, 2023b, p. 160) notes that Goffman, like the English writer Steven Potter, possessed an “inner satirist.” Do we all have sarcastic light bulbs that go off in our heads with unoffered words (as in the bubble above the head of cartoon figures)? No doubt Goffman’s were brighter, he had more, and he was less shy about expressing them than are most people. While their expression brings risks, it can as well offer protective cover available to those receptive to the message and, if called to account, a response of — “only kidding.” The tilt to humor connects to the ironies and unintended consequences of secrecy and complexity Goffman observed in the literature on intelligence and espionage. More broadly, it is also associated with his close observation of all that can go awry in interaction presumed to be rational and intentional, anchored in solid structures and guided by guardrails.

Sherri Cavan (2011, p. 17), following Sartre, observes that “in large measure the identity of ‘jew’ came from and was reinforced by the outside world — from other people who reacted to the ‘idea of the Jew.’” Goffman did not advertise it, but neither did he hide his secular version of what he called in my 1961 class “marks of the tribe.” Unlike some mid-century leaders of the profession, he did not change his last name. Others with last names such as Salomonsen, Ehrenberg, and Schkolnick did and became household names, if not with their original names.

Goffman’s accommodation involving neither undue denial, nor assertion, fits within the vague moral and empirical term *authenticity*. In *Stigma*, he cites Anatole Broyard (1950) on authenticity. Broyard was a character in the novel by Brossard mentioned above. If you cannot exit the game, the higher ideal apparently being to do the best you can with the hand you were dealt. Do not spend any more time than necessary in fighting it, nor in denying it. Goffman, in contrast to Sartre, more fully acknowledges social, historical, and environmental limits, even as a degree of

the existentialist's freedom to choose within the offerings provided remains. This is made easier if you are in a society offering upward mobility, at least in its formal elements and your stigma has low or no visibility.

PROFESSIONAL WAVERING

Until the very end, with his American Sociological Association presidency in 1980, Goffman showed an independent spirit — not belonging to any of the latter's rapidly expanding interest sections, not using students as researchers or co-authoring papers, not seeking large research grants. At the annual conventions he did not spend time schmoozing in the public areas or wear a name tag. This served the mystique of the “mysterious Goffman” and may have expressed a garden variety role distance in ignoring expectations of communality among professional peers whom he felt rejected him and could be boring, or at least square as well. Being anonymous protected his privacy and meant not having to spend time with, or having to feign interest in, uninvited intruders.

For most of his time at Penn he seemed to reject sociology. He was not, in general, welcoming of sociology graduate students and had little to do with the department. His office was in anthropology (Delaney 2013).¹⁹ Despite his acclaim, I think for most of his career he felt on the outside of Sociology Incorporated, being neither a sweeping big picture theorist, nor a fancy methodologist, nor a big grants entrepreneur.

For the field's *sancien* guardians, attention to social problems topics and finding data in everything and everywhere was seen as less serious and tainted relative to studying the family, organizations, social theory, or methods. Some of the contamination spilled over onto those studying such topics — they might even be seen as “dirty workers” per Hughes (1992; Klockars 1980). Other than at Chicago (and at midwestern schools where many of its graduates ended up) and even there after the 1950s, field work and studies in social disorganization, deviance, and criminology were less valued than at other leading schools such as Columbia and Harvard.²⁰ They were relegated to midwestern and western state schools. In the early 1970s when the distinguished criminologist Lloyd Ohlin, then a professor at the Harvard Law School, sought an affiliation with the sociology department he was rejected. In the same fashion, when Erving Goffman spent 1966–1967 there and indicated interest in moving, Harvard would not come up with the funds.

When Travis Hirschi (2012) told Goffman that a journal editor wasn't sure if a paper Travis submitted on prostitutes, “was really sociology,” Goffman replied, “they'll always find a way to put you down.” Sherri Cavan reported to me that when she asked Erving why he wanted to run for ASA president when he had shown no interest in any kind of organizational work in the past, he responded, “Well, this is one way I can validate myself in the field.”

Goffman did not give sociological researchers the reference deference they usually receive (one exception was his early generosity in citing term papers of his own graduate students and his University of Chicago fellow students). He was criticized

for ignoring the literature of his peers. Much of his referenced data came from first person nonfiction, journalistic or novelistic accounts. Some of the data could be characterized as “Hollywood sociology.” Yet this was a way of seeking to keep it real. Writing about familiar everyday life encounters should be understandable to lay people. The higher flying, abstract jargon of the specialists for things that could not be directly observed not only made them subject to humor, but it was also not of much use to the average person.

Literature reviews and acknowledgment of sources are hallmarks of good scholarship and fairness. They educate and permit the reader to locate and track an author’s work and development. Intensively mining what a given field of specialization at that moment defines as “the literature,” and fully acknowledging the sources one draws from, is of course the right thing even as it can mean less time available for one’s own work and a bit less credit.

Neglect of the literature can bring costs, beyond being labeled a journalist. These include attacks for bad scholarly citizenship and failing to benefit from the reciprocity of peers citing each other back and forth. When references are offered, it took the form of general acknowledgement rather than detailed references, which matters — as does who, and what, is *not* cited. As Goffman noted, who is *not* invited to a dinner party can be more interesting than who is. Reference slighting, or lightening, can simply be a way of acknowledging what sparked thoughts or it may be a dodgy way to impact perception of a scholar’s originality. Gregory W.H. Smith (2022, p. 90) suggests if Goffman was “reticent about acknowledging ‘a Simmelian influence’, then that was because of his broader tendency to cover his tracks.”

As a somewhat raggedy, beginning graduate student, leery of premature commitment as a dreaded organization man, I asked him if it was necessary to join the association. Bemused, he assured me it was not and cited some well-known sociologists as examples, some even succeeded without a PhD. It is hard to imagine that in two short decades this self-proclaimed maverick would become the dignified head of an organization he once role-distanced.

In a break with the usual practice, he did not choose a theme for the annual ASA meeting he was to chair, regarding it as unneeded self-promotion and unhelpful in such a varied field. The Society for the Study of Social Problems and the Society for the Study of Symbolic Interaction were founded by his close colleagues within the University of Chicago tradition; the tradition is chronicled in Fine (1995) But Goffman did not belong to either group.

COSTS

Goffman took the distantiation favored by Levy-Strauss, framing, and self-reflectivity to Olympian heights. While closeness to the scene at hand was essential, so too was emotional and psychological independence from subjects at some point. With this can come buried insights, things not seen by insiders, and refreshing hypocrisy-exposure. I imagine his brilliance and perhaps arrogance masking self-doubts, could make

him feel outside, lonely and set apart — even from the insiders within his scholarly world — as he saw things they did not. Yet there can be costs.

When others are aware of the framing powers of the distantiator, there is the risk of impeding honest expressions, as the audience is put on guard. Berger (1973) observes, “I have seen people become fidgety when Goffman walks into a room, suddenly self-conscious that their apparently effortless sociability might reveal something unintentional.” That is the case even if, as Freud is mis-quoted to have said, “sometimes a cigar is just a cigar.”

Hard working, hyper-aware, meta role players as buffered frame analysts, have other challenges. Their heightened self-consciousness is not unlike the detective who can never put a pressing case to rest or the actor who, even off stage, cannot get out of the act. In an engineered media environment with omnipresent cell phones, tracking and usage devices, drones, video cameras, and computers there is ever more to attend to. Traditional back stages shrink even as new ones appear behind which data is quietly gathered and massaged, or worse.

The analyst steeped in Goffmanian awareness of culture, context, and contingency may find it hard not to always be thinking of what is behind the frame the other presents. Analysts, as well, may be unduly self-conscious in fretting/obsessing about how successful they are in their strategic presentations and in risk-adverse moves to avoid slippages.

Just as an architect looks at the design of a building or a chef at ingredients in a dish, an analyst of interactions may find it hard not to reflect on the environment and what can go wrong — the physical factors that can intrude to disrupt the moment (power outages); slips of the tongue or of the foot; unwanted bodily sounds; unseen signals given off by the other such as an unzipped fly; and not least, the culturally resonant attributes the other presents such as ethnicity, gender, body size, and capability. People are seen as social types, rather than as unique individuals.

While all people have some awareness of the above factors, they do not define their work life, nor risk overflowing simple interactions. In addition, for Goffman and others lacking conventional restraints, everyday interactions bring opportunities and temptations to experiment, learn and educate. The outsider as analyst, particularly if a workaholic like Goffman, may find it difficult to just be unpreoccupied in the situation.

At times, with a shout to yester year’s TV band leader Lawrence Welk, one needs to “turn off the bubble machine.” There can be a cost to personal relations in not being fully present and inadequately attending to another person. Being the detached frame analyst always outside of any life situation may destroy spontaneity and the joys of the moment. If not well hidden, it shows a lack of respect for the other.

There is also the danger of knee-jerk cynicism and the risk of arrogance toward, rather than empathy for, the unwise not privy to the meta-analyst’s presumed knowledge gained by standing apart. There is the disconcerting, paradoxical sociology of knowledge fact regarding awareness of the strong limits on standing completely outside. This is a result of the cultural, physical, and natural factors that make

awareness and conclusions at least somewhat relative and tentative. This can immobilize the scholar watching the building burn, while pondering the regeneration process that appears out of the ashes if one does not die from smoke inhalation.

The humility brought by reflexivity, tolerance, and awareness of legitimate value conflicts can bring one too close to the shoals of moral relativity gone amuck or nihilism. Irony, paradox, and tradeoffs are ever present and human situations are endlessly negotiable and contestable, no matter the purity of motives and intentions, the tenacity and energy brought to a problem, or the clarity of the evidence. At times it is, of course, necessary to just be in the moment and to stop analyzing and to go beyond value conflicts and the political need to take a stand. The challenge is knowing when.

There can be other costs to outsiders involving missing the beat, fear of exposure, or hurtful leakages directed at the outsider. In class he pointedly offered veiled, if humorous, warnings to those among his students (almost all) who were “upwardly mobile,” “detrified persons of stigmatized ethnic identity.” Goffman reminded us of the recent and perhaps precarious nature of the “intrusion” of Catholics, Jews, Blacks, and those of humble origins into the genteel (and genteel) elite places that had previously denied “our kind” status to them. No matter how good a student or nouveau role player you were, there were risks. Things might not be as rosy as they appeared. The polite veneer of acceptance might mask some really ugly attitudes toward your people and contingencies beyond your control might reveal who you were or started as, or who you remain (for some aspects anyway), no matter the fine costumes and trappings of place and acquired style. Caution was needed. A little feigned role commitment to the locals (whether their person or their ways) might be the best defense for a deeply felt, underground role distance.

The book the *True Believer* was published in 1951 and later several of his Berkeley students did work on cults. The cults provided data for categorization and human-interest fodder (“how can they believe that shit?”) and could engender discomfort with the disingenuousness implicit in the role in its unadulterated form. It was necessary to walking in subjects’ shoes. Some of his students even crossed over providing a moral lesson — be wary.

The observer needed to avoid being captured by the observed — for example, in studying drug users or skiing/surfing dropouts they might conclude it was more fun to indulge than to study.

In class, he said that after the challenge of gaining access there was the problem of remembering “who you are.” That is not an easy thing to do if one is to meet the standard of full engagement.

Yet that degree of engagement can damage the independence of the analyst and the pulls of human connection (let alone the disingenuousness that may be involved in gaining fake intimacy as a collection tool for shielded data) can bring harm. The issues are tangled.

A few searchers such as Victor Rios (2011) and Sam Heilman (2008) initially were insiders who brought authenticity to their outsider findings as scholars. Heilman who

did participant observation in a synagogue might even be described as an “observant participator” (Mendolovitz 2009). In contrast to Goffman’s (1953, p. 2) “observer participant” role in doing his dissertation,²¹ Rios moved out of the participant role. This reverses the fieldworker’s usual concern with crossing over to the group being studied. Here we have insiders pulled by the norms of the professional scholar to become outsiders in one sense. Goffman’s daughter Alice conversely was muddled in the gray waters while dipping in and getting out, or in some observer’s eyes not getting out and moving too far from outsider to insider (Goffman 2014; Lewis-Kraus 2016).

His advice, and sometimes contradictory behavior, require a bit of fancy footwork to determine where he really stood with respect to maintaining (at least eventually) some social distance and independence. That could be difficult because of the involuntary, or at least barely conscious, habits and positive emotions that so easily flow from interaction over long periods of time with those studied and the temptations that maybe present.

In what may have been said in jest, in talking about fieldwork at the University of Manchester, he told students, “If you have to sleep with them, sleep with them” (Winkin 2022b, p. 160). Whatever the challenges his dominant fieldwork message was to keep a low profile. Chameleons get away with more. Masks exist for a reason. Tom Scheff (2006) asked Goffman about how to deal with some ethical challenges from his field work in a mental hospital. Goffman advised his student to be a *lamelke* (“little lamb” in Yiddish) so as not to impede his research. He gave similar advice to John Lofland (2009) regarding his thesis observation of cult members.

Goffman sought invisibility or minimum visibility in being indirect about his field work and avoided self-promotion and publicity. His ostensible public reasons for his early field work (an interest in the farming practices of islanders, being an athletic director in the mental hospital) hid his true purpose. I would be surprised if he told those who trained him to be a card dealer or the licensing authorities in Nevada that he and his wife had been banned from the tables for counting cards, nor about his research interests.

He also felt outside the instant, seemingly effortless, success some peers such as Neil Smelser and Robert Bellha had. They started with bountiful scholarships and continued with strong patron support. Consider an exchange Goffman had with the latter. Bellha was favored with the benevolent and powerful tutelage and patronage of Talcott Parsons. Bellha recalled a meeting in which Goffman told of, “the difficulties of getting ahead in the academic profession: how one had to constantly compete with others to get material published, speak at meetings, and so on. As Bellha objected that he had never had to go through any of that, Goffman gave him a grim look and said out loud: ‘Bob, you didn’t have to. You were Talcott’s fair-haired boy. You never had to compete for anything’” (Bortolini 2021, p. 99).

According to Winkin (2022a), Goffman, in his first teaching job, doubting²² that he would receive tenure, considered leaving the academy. Later in his career he was denied honors that should have been his, such as a stint at the Center for Advanced

Study at Princeton. He received few awards and only two honorary doctorates, an astounding oversight for someone of his world class status.

The need to struggle in the face of the challenges faced by the lonely outsider is seen in his advice to students. Seeing John Lofland at a theater he rushed by saying, “you should be home working.” Another time, as he scurried by a student talking to another, he said, “don’t talk it, go home and write it” (Lofland 2009, p. 10) In another example, he told a student who encountered him off campus, “In the time I spent talking to you I could be home writing a paper.”

YES, BUT

As so often, there are contradictions and “yes, buts” in reaching strong, unitary conclusions. Thus, Goffman was also in many ways an insider. In his first teaching job he was almost immediately given tenure at Berkeley, although “only” as an associate professor (that quickly changed a few years later). Moving to Penn from Berkeley he had the best gig — one that ever-competitive, elite research professors only dream of — the highest salary of any social science faculty member and almost no teaching. He was elected president of the American Sociological Association and a member of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences. He was among the most widely read and cited social scientists of his era and that continues.

Goffman did not choose an unconventional lifestyle. He was conventional in his personal presentations; often a bow tie in class and a preppy look with the, then fashionable, white buck shoes, scheduling and honoring appointments, marrying into a high-status Episcopalian family, fancy sports cars, fine wines, beautiful homes in the best neighborhoods,²³ a vacation home, European travel, antique collection, private schools and Yale for his son, and intense involvement in the stock market.

A factor in his moving to Penn, beyond the salary and almost no teaching, was the desire as a single parent to shield his young son from the hippy street culture, as the sacred spaces of Telegraph Avenue faced profanation by the lesser aspects of the counterculture. He was also displeased with the intrusions into work brought by the 1960s Berkeley political activism.

In a personal communication Sherri Cavan, who was among his best students and who became his close friend, told me, “I always thought of him as being very conventional and conservative and I thought he was attracted to me because I was none of those things.” That observation might also apply to his close friendship with his student John Irwin, my friend and fellow surfer, who wrote about his experiences as a former armed robber and felon, activist for prison reform, and surfer (Irwin 1977, 1987, 2007). Erving did not have those experiences, nor was he a bohemian, hipster, beatnik, fate-tempting character, or physical risktaker, although he could be appreciative. Onlookers may have vicarious emotional experiences of rule breaking beyond those experienced by perpetrators, documented by another Chicago sociologist Jack Katz (1988). Next, we turn to politics where again claims about him conflict.

POLITICS

As in the other categories in Table 1, the Rorschach-infused tea leaves can be read to suggest whatever the observer wants about the political implications of his work and his personal politics and how these might connect. Who gets to make the call about what is in a work? If we cannot trust the author as Goffman suggested (Verhoeven 1993) to reliably tell us, can we rely on the disharmonious kibitzer chorus to give us adequate answers when they can't agree? Note the varied takes of Gouldner (1970), Young (1971), Gamson (1985), and Collins (1986) on regular politics and the opposing views of Wedel (1978) or West (1996) involving feminism.

A distinction is needed between the presence of explicit political goals and/or policy relevance in a person's work and their absence. The former can involve advocating a political ideology, a particular policy position or, a more neutral engagement with a social issue — offering concepts and data about it — but not starting with a policy argument to advance. None of the approaches are value neutral (both involve non-scientific choices and assumptions), but in principle they can be independent.

Goffman was educated during a less contentious time when there was an effort to divorce politics from scholarship and, to the extent possible, engage in value-free inquiry. Political struggles took energy away from the work and could delegitimize results via taints of unholy and unclean partisanship, let alone repression. Most of Goffman's teachers sought to divorce their personal politics from their work. "Just the facts, Ma-am" as Jack Webb of the 1950s tv program "Dragnet" said. A bit before Goffman, that was even the case for Robert Park, despite the relevant topics he studied. This approach contrasted with Jane Adams and the earlier social pathologists at the University of Chicago who sought to join research with social amelioration (Deegan 1990).

Goffman was pulled between strong personal ambition in a competitive environment and communal goals that research might serve. Louis Wirth, one of Goffman's teachers valued policy research and, with Robert Park, hoped that careful knowledge could aid reform. But Goffman made it clear that he did not play on that team (Verhoeven 1993).

At the end of the last meeting in the class I took from him, a student said, "this is all very interesting Professor Goffman, but what's the use of it for changing the conditions you describe?" Goffman did not appreciate the question, showed visible tension and replied, "I'm not in that business." He hurriedly gathered his notes and left the room. His business was the pretty lonely generation of knowledge with less cooperation with co-workers and sponsoring organizations (whether commercial, educational, or policy/ideological) than many of his colleagues. Simmel expressed similar ideas — in his classic book on money he seeks to go beyond moralizing and having to choose between good and evil. He writes, "it is our task not to complain or to condone but only to understand" (Simmel 1978, p. 277). The juggling and weaving social studies scholar with a radar circling receptor to pull in many types of data is forever pulled — whether between research for its own sake and research for social

needs, between personal ambition and disciplinary and organizational needs, and between the need to complexify and yet simplify.

He agreed with his University of Chicago friends Howard Becker and Joseph Gusfield regarding care in listening to all sides. His elaborating on the hegemonic “normal” view needs to be considered alongside of the view of the stigmatized toward that view (Hunt 1966; Tyler 2018). Given power and information imbalances with respect to groups having their say, special warrant should be given to subordinates who lack the same resources to define and spread the narrative. That does not, however, mean we should not listen to, and analyze, narratives of the hegemon as he did with the voice of the “normal” in *Stigma*.²⁴ When that is done, we see that credibility is stratified and we need attend to the controlling impacts of dominant narratives and the limits on doing research untouched by any personal and political interests. He would also be in strong agreement with Gusfield who, in a personal conversation, answered Becker’s (1967) question, “who’s side are we on by saying, ‘we are on our side’ — with doses of skepticism applied even there. With Weber (1961, p. 147) he was aware of the need to identify the ‘inconvenient facts’ in disagreements — on all sides, including ‘our side.’”

Goffman was initially skeptical of any communication, even those unsullied by sponsorship or club membership. He also wanted to be as independent of sponsors and organizations as possible, whether academic or political.²⁵ He was particularly alert to hegemonic narratives — whether from political or academic groups. He was acutely aware of the self-serving nature of groups and individuals that had the power, reward strings, and megaphones to define and proclaim what was legitimate and real and of the inertial habit of the taken for granted.²⁶

He had a cognitive and visceral appreciation of libertarianism and how satire could upend expectations. Goffman’s “disruptive imagination,” as shown in his writing, could be iconoclastic, provocative, and jarring and while might, or might not, be tongue in cheek, is ever refreshing. This perhaps suggests a flirtation with anarchism — when once asked about his politics he responded, perhaps jocularly, “anarchist,” yet he does not engage directly with the topic or its literature (Gamson 1985, p. 665).

Apart from links to social issues in waking people up, in ringing the alarm, there is the interesting question of what satire does for the psychic needs of the satirist gleefully throwing verbal stink bombs.²⁷ This can permit having and eating your cake. The form can offer protective cover, having it both ways — being righteously critical for those who get it and satisfying his and their inner indignation, while offering plausible denial to the suspicious.

A further factor, Goffman came of age during the era of the McCarthyite, the Cold War, and anti-communist hysteria. He was aware of the risks faced by outspoken professors.²⁸ Gary Jaworski (2021, 2023b) nicely captures the sensibility and scene around the University of Chicago at the time. Impression management, secrecy, and suspicion went beyond the mundaneness of one’s daily round. They are taken to an extreme in authoritarian societies where the wrong attitudes or symbolic offerings

could lead to imprisonment or worse.²⁹ Extreme care in impression management could be about the game of staying alive, whether professionally or literally.

Being in somewhat vulnerable positions as a double immigrant, upwardly mobile outsider, the nonboat rocking, hyper-conformity of deminstrelization (Goffman 1963) could be appealing to the outsider. Blending and blanding in could be smart play. In threatening times, as President Johnson said, it was better to be inside the tent pissing out, than the reverse. Hedge your bets, do not show your aces until you really must. To get along, go along, or at least express your criticism indirectly with the chance to evade your intended meaning — should you be called to account. Deftly lead the reader to what is hidden between the lines. This connects to the status insecurity or incongruence the outsider, who moves toward the center, can experience.³⁰

In his view it was unwise to make direct moral arguments in one's writing. If you wanted to offer a moral argument, simply present the facts that point in the direction of the argument one would make. As he told John Lofland (2009, p. 11), "just let it lay there." Readers should draw the right conclusion without it being forced on them. The poignancy of so many of his well-chosen examples permits that.

One of his gifts was the ability to select powerful examples that moved the reader — such as the fictional letter that opened *Stigma* from the girl born without a nose. Dennis Wrong (2011, p. 18) catches this in noting that Goffman had "a palpable sense of reality" and that is even more important than a sociologist's "theoretical reach, logical rigor, empirical exactitude, or moral passion." Based on his own responses, he had a deep, imaginative sensitivity to how others would respond to his memorable examples expressed with literary flair. A less creative scholar might be more politically explicit, making the point with a heavier hand.

His stance is consistent with Hemingway's advice to "show the readers everything, tell them nothing." It also fits with sociology's neutral 1950s' imperative to become a respectable science with a tone of, "if you want to send a message call Western Union." Let your veiled (but not too veiled) message (if there is one) hit the reader in the gut through self-discovery, rather than lecturing. Is that manipulative? Perhaps, but for a good cause.

HIS PERSONAL POLITICS

While his work can be seen as a plea for the dignity of persons in the face of self-serving authorities wherever they are found, he avoided the political activism of the time.³¹ As he walked by an open spring meeting during one Berkeley crisis or another, I recall someone asked, "Professor Goffman, where do you stand?" He responded, "when they start shooting students from the steps of Sproul Hall, I guess I'll get involved, but not until then."

In 1967 Goffman was listed as a participant in a conference on "The Dialectics of Liberation" with notable radical activists on the program. For unknown reasons he

did not attend. A fellow faculty member told me it was because he did not want to share a platform with activists such as Stokely Carmichael.

Despite starting with an MA thesis on aspects of social class and his awareness of the serious determinism of the collectivity and its culture, he was more drawn to private troubles. He was not as explicit as C. Wright Mills (2000) was in making the connection between personal and social issues. Consider the work on embarrassment, face, and stigma. The intricacies of observable identity presentations interested him more than the esoterica of ideological claims about unseen social forces and pressures. Rather than directly confronting the functionalist or naked power issues around stratification or advocating for, and looking at, those wanting to change systems, Goffman studied how people made do in working over, and under, ever-vulnerable systems. Individuals might be able to personally reverse things for themselves, but that did little for their less fortunate brethren. Whatever they may share as Mertonian (Merton 1956) straining innovators, comedians, rebels, and bank robbers are different from revolutionaries.³²

What Goffman's student Michael Delaney (2008, p. 55) said of David Riesman — that he was “an establishmentarian contrarian” who could be critical and skeptical without being “capaciously negativistic” — also applies to Goffman. Like Weber, his breadth of vision, science-based humility, and his initial skepticism made him too large for the simplistic, and ever variable, conventional political labels. One needed distance from them, even while carefully listening for the fragments of empirical or ethical truths they might contain. With respect to political beliefs apart from activism, Goffman can be seen as a mixture of liberal, conservative, and radical. Different spins of the wheel align him with different perspectives.

He Was a Liberal

To the extent that he had a definable politics it would have been a kind of enlightenment-humanism focusing on the dignity due citizens, with an appreciation for pluralism and protecting the rights of the disadvantaged and the stigmatized and the need to avoid the unwanted consequences from secondary deviance (Becker 1963; Lemert 1951, 1972; Marx and Guzik 2017). His politics anticipated feminism in seeing power as it involved hierarchy, status, and opportunity in personal interactions and in his appreciation of emotions as a proper topic for social inquiry.

As sociologists knew long before Foucault, governance goes far beyond the state and police uniforms (work comparing Goffman and Foucault waits to be done).³³ Situations of power were not restricted to government or persons in costumes holding the scepter or more broadly only within political economy. Goffman made this clear in the statement from Spencer's *The Principles of Sociology* that opened *Relations in Public*

If ... we consider only that species of conduct which involves direct relations with other persons, and if under the name of government we include all control

of such conduct, however arising, then we must say that the earliest kind of government, the most general kind of government, and the government which ever spontaneously recommencing, is the government of ceremonials observance ... This kind of government ... [has] and continues to have, the largest share in regulating men's lives. (Goffman 1971)

Governance as social regulation and control is found in interpersonal interactions at all levels, including work, educational, and religious organizations, not just congress, legislatures, and courts. In addition to the limits and facilitants of natural and engineered environments, the threats, coercion, and rewards of formal organizations exist alongside of the gauze of a translucent, subterfugal, all-encompassing culture that provides direction and justification for interaction.

It is not known if he voted in the United States. Dual citizenship was possible and he retained his Canadian citizenship. Personally knowing so many; of his Chicago cohort as broadly defined (Joseph Gusfield, Fred Davis, Howard Becker, Ned Polsky, Lisa (Redfield) Peattie, John Clausen, Ralph Turner, Henry Quarantelli, Al Reiss, Tom Shibutani, Herb Gans, Orrin Klapp, Morris and Charlotte Schwartz, fellow travelers Bennet Berger, Egon Bittner, Sheldon Messenger and senior colleagues such as Everett Hughes, Herbert Blumer, David Riesman, Alfred Lindesmith, Nathan Keyfitz, Ed Lemert, Lewis Coser, and Hal Wilenski), if a political affiliation was asked, I think it would likely have been liberal democrat. But if correct, that would have been without great enthusiasm given his awareness of the potential disjuncture between claims and the actual state of whatever is being claimed.³⁴ Would he agree with the answer to the question, “Do you know how to tell if a politician is lying?” — “When his lips are moving” or Mark Twain saying, “I never vote, it only encourages them”?

He Was a Conservative

There is a sense in which not to challenge the status quo is to support it.³⁵ Some observers see his default position here, the apoliticality of his research, and his not being a more direct political actor as conservative, even as he was very conventional in his lifestyle presentations. He might also be indirectly accused of guilt by association given his financial support from Tom Schelling in the year spent in Cambridge (Jaworski 2023b). As a Cold War intellectual, Schelling had worked at the Airforce's RAND Corporation. His ideas about conflict are believed by many scholars to have contributed to prolonging the Vietnam War.

With respect to content, in wearing his Durkheim hat, he can be seen as conservative. He appreciates the role of tradition, shared standards, and self-correcting measures in sustaining society (apart from what he personally felt about what was sustained). He would likely agree with Goethe that, “none are more hopelessly endangered than those who falsely believe they are safe.”

He shares the conservative's emphasis on the fragility, vulnerability, and risks of individual and joint actions and the importance of institutions and culture in making group life possible. He was very aware of the eternal frailty of the ties

that bind and the limits of subsequent social control efforts to strengthen or repair them.

He sees the above without denying the harms in the routine (nondestabilized) workings of unfairly stratified settings fueled by contestable dominant narratives. Along with principled conservatism, he was acutely aware of the heavy, entropic baggage that tradition and communality could also portage. He winces at the personal hurts caused by injustice, misalignments, breakdowns and monkey business, and the social harms caused by wroughting the sacred order asunder, particularly in public settings. His writing (Goffman 1971) about normalcy and the insanity of place rise to oxygen gasping heights in the infinite paranoia and regress of doubts and doubts about doubts they invite.

What he failed to study can also be taken as a sign of conservatism. As Gouldner (1970) observes, because he mostly worked at the micro level (if not in the beginning where role and organizations were more prominent), he does not give much attention to the history, institutions, or organizations within which interaction occurs. Yet his approach and a soft version of functionalism can lend themselves well to understanding historical changes.

For example, contrasting the manners of interest to Goffman in the Victorian age with those at mid-century brought by answering machines, caller-ID, cell phones, texting, and the internet offers a rich way to grasp historical changes in self-presentations and the accompanying etiquette.³⁶ Sorely missed by post-modernists focusing on descriptive differences and relativism, is the enduring presence of some common communication structures and patterns. To the extent that some intentions, forms, and consequences endure across human societies, points are scored for the functionalist, positivist team. Whether a pipe carries wine or effluent, it is still a pipe.

For Goffman, history involves background residuals accepted, but not much questioned. They are too removed, hazy, multifaceted, variable, and changeable to be easily captured by the direct reality of immediate experience. Observation and participation in daily life is not of much use in grasping the immensity of civilizations over decades and centuries as done by big picture scholars such as Spencer and Sorokin. He did not directly deal with the meshing of political and economic factors at the societal level. In six of his books, I found only one reference to Marx — that was in *Stigma* (Goffman 1963, p. 148), to a Gary and not to Karl or Groucho.³⁷

A student named Linton was in the class I took. When Goffman read the name list in the first meeting and saw the name Linton he said, “a fine name.” He was referring to Ralph Linton, a famous anthropologist of the time whose work on roles he appreciated. He next read my last name and judiciously said nothing, at which point the class laughed.

Goffman was wary of broad claims about the abstraction called “society,” let alone predicting the future *à la* historical determinism. In one of his more memorable observations: “He who would combat false consciousness and awaken people to their true interests has much to do, because the sleep is very deep. And I do not

intend here to provide a lullaby but merely to sneak in and watch the way people snore” (Goffman 1974, p. 14). Here he departs from Freud (1965, p. ix) who wanted instead to “agitate the sleep of mankind.” His sociology of knowledge and stratification approaches made him wary of hegemonic claims to moral and factual truths that were not to be questioned. To announce that the emperor is without clothes, muck-raking exposure, and unveiling individual and organizational masks can be a profoundly radical, in-your-face act. A skeptical stance regarding dominant narratives is a consciousness-raising event for any group. As with comedians and cartoonists, unveiling can be “radical” — not in the left–right sense, but in its exposure of hypocrisy and in the rejection of conventional accounts and their frequent inadequacies, lies, distortions, and omissions.

He Was a Radical

Liberal-conservative labels fail us badly in dealing with the intricacies he offered. He can also be framed as a radical, transcending the conventional left–right distinctions. Whatever their coloration, knocking sacred cows over is a radical act, as is the scripted quality of political messages with their hint of disingenuousness — whether in depicting heroes or villains, utopias, or dystopias. Zhengyuan Fu (1989) offers a rich analysis of the politics of impression management in the People’s Republic of China.

Goffman’s acute awareness of how “already existing circumstances” (such as power, wealth, and status) set conditions and limits on the acknowledged freedom individuals have to act reflects among Karl Marx’s (1951) most widely known observations “Men make their own history, but they do not make it as they please; they do not make it under self-selected circumstances, but under circumstances existing already, given and transmitted from the past.”

Given the constraints of the natural and physical worlds, the investors, whether coercively or softly, call the tunes to which the group dances. Existentialist claims about the possibility of choosing freedom need lots of qualification. Hegemony with its legitimating frames is a powerful constraint humans face across various settings and life roles. He broadly accepted Karl Marx’s, and later Gramsci’s, ideas about consciousness. Goffman writes, that presenting a face reflecting approved attributes can “... make every man his own jailer; this a fundamental social constraint even though each man may like his cell” (Goffman 1967, p. 10).

This shows the ultimate victory of culture and its henchperson socialization in a marketing/media-oriented, other-directed society. Whether for Marxists, critical theorists, Huxley, Orwell, Vance Packard, David Riesman, or C.W. Mills, liking your cell, drugs, or escapist media involve a terrible bargain. This speaks directly to false consciousness and several kinds of alienation identified by Melvin Seeman (1959). There are of course factors working against this through the dances of control and counter-control and counter-counter control *ad infinitum*.

FOREVER ENIGMATIC

Do I contradict myself?

Very well then I contradict myself

I am large, I contain multitudes.

Walt Whitman

In his song “Masters of War” Bob Dylan sings of those who hide behind walls and desks, “I just want you to know I can see through your masks.” Goffman, above all, saw behind and above the masks. He had the courage to articulate what others saw but *did not* say. But he also saw what others *did not* see.

The unseen may involve an immoral gap between what is revealed and what lies (in both senses) behind or the opposite. In considering the masks, meshes, and misses that he so creatively mapped, he called out the self-serving hypocrisy and distortions of dominant narratives that masks make possible. As noted, masks, as well, could serve the inauthenticity of those who as King Lear (Act 3, Scene 2) says, more “sinned against than sinning.” (Marx 1991) are more “sinned against than sinning” (Marx 1991). Yet he also saw their positive meshing functions at both the micro and macro level, including helping reintegration after a miss or a mess. Is this inconsistent? Caught in an inconsistency in his thoughts on gender and feminism, Goffman remarked, that he was “full of contradictions” (Deegan 2014, p. 8). And so, as with Walt Whitman, us, and society, he was.

Goffman was, and will remain, a pre-eminent social thinker of his era and well into the future. He struck original intellectual chords that resonated with the feelings, needs and anxieties of the time — whether mass society, nuclear war, the Cold War, Korea, inequalities, civil disorder, crime, or science/technology dystopias.

Yet many of his concepts and insights are likely to endure because they are so universal. The vase is there, although what it is filled with will vary across situations, societies, and time periods. His was the gift of knowledge and wisdom that required no reciprocity, other than the joy of passing them on — the gift that keeps on giving.

Goffman was the poster boy for the *role committed* academic life. In class he said that if you were fortunate enough early on, you would find a topic and approaches that would sustain you throughout your career. If not, you were in the wrong business. For those so fortunate, what began as exploring a possible job would become a sacred calling, even at the price of some *role distance* and dialectic disingenuousness, given the games professors had to play in the bureaucratic, increasingly politicized university. He deliciously pierced the pretentious and sanctimonious masks there, as in so many other areas of social life. Yet this occurred with his simultaneous understanding of the importance of role playing (whether authentic or inauthentic) for social ordering and communality and even self-respect.

Goffman’s personal style and intellect were unique and interwoven in uncharacteristic ways. He gave legitimacy and inspiration to the pioneer, seeking, as Frank Sinatra sang with fervor to do “it my way.” With his emphasis on the social creativity of the self, his view of interaction as fluid and somewhat unpredictable, his modesty,

and his indifference to self-promotion and exegetical work, he would have had some searing, sardonic comment to make about those seeking to understand and explain him. Yet he also welcomed expressions of sentiment and very much valued ritual and ceremony and believed passionately in the cause of social inquiry and understanding.

The Simmel influence on Goffman has often been noted. In conversation, Hughes even referred to him as “our Simmel.” Goffman was initially very aware of the connection and his debt to Simmel. He began his PhD thesis with a quote from Simmel which was dropped from later published versions and Simmel was barely cited after that. Robert Park, a central figure in early Chicago sociology, had studied with Simmel in Berlin and taught some of Goffman’s teachers including Hughes. Goffman inherited their concern with secrecy, the private, and the public.

Max Weber (Weber and Levine 1972, p. 158) was also deeply appreciative of Simmel. Goffman is often associated with Durkheim, yet he shares much with the Weber of *verstehen* as this involves both trying to walk in the other’s shoes and the iron cages of bureaucracy. What Weber wrote of Simmel might also have been written about Erving Goffman:

... crucial aspects of his methodology are unacceptable. His substantive results must with usual frequency be regarded with reservations ... His mode of exposition strikes one at times as strange ... On the other hand, one finds oneself absolutely compelled to affirm that his mode of exposition is simply brilliant and, what is more important, attains results that are intrinsic to it and not to be attained by any imitator. Indeed nearly every one of his works abound in important, new theoretical ideas and the most subtle observations ... But even the false ones contain a wealth of stimulation for one’s own further thoughts ... The same holds true of his epistemological and methodological foundations ... [he] fully deserves his reputation as one of the foremost thinkers, a first-rate stimulator of academic youth and academics colleagues (Weber and Levine 1972, p. 158).

John Lofland (1984, p. 32) is similarly appreciative of Goffman and adds a personal tone:

These, then, are among Goffman’s legacies to sociology: inspired charter of the interaction order; penetrating conceptualizer who peppered our language; dedicated empiricist; lover of theory; serious ethnographer; incessant questioner; intellectual pluralist; a modest wit striving however falteringly for authenticity; cheerful and graceful analyst in a world of tragedy and melancholy, dedicated scholar; loved colleague and friend who made our moments vibrant and alive.

A central perspective echoing through much of Goffman and Simmel is that social life is dominated by vast, contingent, connected, and conflicting (dialectical and more) forces that we gamely try to channel and control. That we sometimes succeed should no more lull us into thinking we can continually pull it off than should failure lead us to stop trying. Synthesis is not unwelcome, but the tensions remain as inherent conditions of human existence.

Patterns and codes, chaos and randomness, integration and systems, order and disorder are the coins of the realm. Our efforts for understanding must wrestle with the

complexities and contradictions brought by the natural and physical world, history, culture, social structure, process, rationality, subjectivity, emotion, irony, and simple twists of fate. In trying to understand the social we seek solid structures on shifting sands and what Marianne Moore (1961) sought for poetry, “real toads within imaginary gardens.” Whatever the challenges, as the man said, it is ours.

NOTES

1. Others in the class were John Lofland, Travis Hirschi, and Marvin Scott. Dorothy Smith, Sherri Cavan, Jackie Wiseman, John Irwin, Arlie Hochschild, Thomas J. Scheff, Harvey Sacks and Roy Turner were in the neighborhood. The sociology of information topics in my project include undercover police, surveillance, secrecy, privacy, deception, borders, identity, fraudulent identity, anonymity, passing, masks, discovery, dirty data, responses of under- and over-dogs to stratification and authority, and muckraking sociology embedded in unintended consequences, surprises, paradox, and irony across institutions, organizations, small groups, settings, situations, and the individual. The lines back to Simmel, Shils, Hughes, Merton, Reisman, Coser, Goffman, and his Chicago peers radiate in what Huebner (2014) called a “common intellectual project.”
2. The Erving Goffman Archives (EGA) created by Dmitri Shalin (2007) is a web-based, open-source project that serves as a clearing house for those interested in the dramaturgical tradition in sociology and biographical methods of research. The EGA is located in the Intercyberlibrary of the UNLV Center of Democratic Culture, <http://www.unlv.edu/centers/cdclv/archives/interactionism/index.html>. Postings on the website are divided into four partially overlapping sections: “Documents and Papers,” “Biographical Materials,” “Critical Assessments,” and “Comments and Dialogues.”
3. Of course, there are fashions, lulls and spikes. In 2001 after his retirement from Berkeley, Robert Blauner told me that he gave away most of his books to graduate students, but none of the five books by Goffman were taken. The students were uninterested or unfamiliar with his work. Ebbs and flows across places and times!
4. Others of course whether fevered by reductionism, reification, correlation-causality confusion, tautological thinking, micro-microscopic nit picking, doctrinaire ideology, denunciation for political incorrectness, and other crimes of graduate students and the lesser brethren see otherwise.
5. Keeping with the “M” alliteration a few more: maps, masks, morality, mendacity, messes, meshes, misses, maverick, magic, and mystery apply as well. This article draws from a long manuscript in process that I would be pleased to share. Some of the introduction and conclusion draw from Marx 2023.
6. Yet all is not lost, given the critical suggestions and support of generous co-conspirators to whom I am most appreciative — David Altheide, Carolyn Ellis, Pat Gillham, Keith Gusik, Richard Hogan, Michael Jacobsen, Gary Jaworski, Dean MacCannel, Harvey Molotch, Larry Nichols, Dmitri Shalin, Gregory Smith, Yves Winkin, Jef Verhoeven, and the late Sherri Cavan.
7. This is reminiscent of a Marx observation, “From the moment I picked up your book until I put it down, I was convulsed with laughter. Someday I intend reading it.” Groucho Marx, <https://quoteinvestigator.com/2015/01/27/funbook/>. I intend reading more as well, although for the vast majority of the material it would be more honest (in a classic cover-your-ass have it both ways response) to say, “I intend to lose no time in reading what you wrote.” Those not so inclined and wanting broad pictures over the last 40 years might begin with: Ditton 1980; Drew and Wooton 1988; Riggins 1990; Burns 1992; Manning 1992; Lemert 1997; Smith 1999; Fine and Smith 2000; Trevino 2003; Scheff 2006; Jacobsen 2010; Winkin and Leeds-Horowitz 2013; Jacobsen and Kristiansen 2015; Hood and Van de Vate 2017; Jacobsen and Smith 2022; Jacobsen 2023;

Winkin 2022a, 2022b; and the Goffman archives. Lenz and Hettlage's (2022) German volume contains some English articles. Scholars able to read French would profit greatly from Winkin's unique biographical work on Goffman. The work grows out of the former's interest in the history of communications research. For more than 5 decades, from his first interview with Goffman in 1975, like a relentless bloodhound, he has studied Goffman's life despite being cordially denied (consistent with Goffman's wishes) access to his personal archives.

8. Nor, perhaps did he systematically follow those by others. Lofland (2009) indicates that he thought *Contemporary Sociology* –the review journal for the American Sociological Association was a specialty journal. This is another indication of his distance over the 1970s decade from sociology.
9. A resolution of the several views might rest in adding my italicized words and dropping [“rather”] to what he wrote in *Asylums* (1961a, p. 168) “the self, then, in this sense is not [*only*] a property of the person to whom it is attributed, but [*also*] dwells in the pattern of social control that is exerted in connection with the person by himself and those around him.”
10. I make this very personal in Marx (1984, 1990, forthcoming) in shamelessly indicating how elements in my situation drew me to Goffman. An even less studied aspect is what draws a scholar to particular students beyond qualities of mind.
11. The panoply of tangled issues here are discussed at length in the Marx-Shalin exchange at https://cdclv.unlv.edu/archives/interactionism/goffman/marx_shalin.html with respect to Shalin's (2008) paper on a biocritical approach to biography.
12. One-trick ponies (however narrow their vision, doubly partial their view and potentially boring their repetition) are due some credit for their persistence and energy and for the strands they provide for the few master tapestry weavers. In another of the ironies that infuse our calling, specialization is not only for insects!
13. Here, for takers of the test we duck the complicating issue of what may be unseen because of repression, the unconscious or Goffman's slippin' and slidin' as a shape changer. Is it not there if the viewer does not see it? It is easy to confound the actual shape with what is symbolically taken from it (or better imposed upon it) by the test taker. Even with advances in brain imaging technology, subjectivity remains a most modest tool in the positivist tool bag, although one vulnerable to the flames of pragmatism.
14. Or perhaps better, a blurred vision, with time coming to be distant from both the old and new group and feeling even more homeless until connecting with other marginals sharing the pattern. For the early Chicago social pathologists studying the presumed social and personal disorganization of immigrants and their children, the source was in their uprootedness and the tensions between traditional and the new culture. That was particularly likely for the interstitial second generation. The successful cultural assimilation, if not social integration, of later offspring might even qualify the latter to be seen as “honorary insiders.” While sharing a communal sentiment, it is the reverse of the “courtesy stigma” status allocated the wise outsider in *Stigma*.
15. For Simmel this contrasts with the more mobile wanderer who flits between groups and the outsider who has no specific relation with the group. One can always elaborate further (e.g. Schuetz 1944, Bauman 1997 and Goldberg 2021 on the context for Simmel). An issue that can't be taught is knowing when to stop the elaboration and just how many evocative examples are needed. Parsimony and the pleasure of colorful examples remain at odds in the divided soul of the humanist who also seeks to be a scientist. Is the pleasure/goal in the writer's production, the reader's consumption, or in advancing abstract knowledge?
16. The negative view was encouraged by unwarranted extensions of the Clark and Clark's (1947) early research on race and children's preference for a black or white doll. Certainly, the term “self-hatred” (Lewin 1942) has some traction, but it is much too sweeping and easily subject to

misinterpretation and misuse. A distinction is needed between a member's attitude toward the group as against toward oneself.

17. His timing was impeccable, waiting just an instant for the audience to catch on to what he was saying. But he also would pause in seeming profound reflection or distance from what he himself had just said. He applied his framing-questioning stance to himself.
18. Others he appreciated were Mort Sahl, Bob Newhart, Don Rickles, and Jonathan Winters.
19. He did however work with sociology scholars such as Michael Delaney, Gary Fine, Carol Gardner, Sam Heilman, and Evitar Zerubavel.
20. This may have been reflected in what he said when I talked to him about finding my initial job, "the best you can hope for is a job in a second-rate mid-western state school." This was the no punches pulled realism I admired in other contexts, although it turned out to be wrong. If I had continued with my NIMH grant to study a counterculture cult as I initially planned, it may well have been true, given the direction of the field at the time away from the Chicago of Park and Hughes. But instead, for a combination of personal and political reasons, I wrote (Marx 1967) *Protest and Prejudice*, a quantitative study on the civil rights movement of interest to (*sic*) "eastern first rate" private schools.
21. In posthumously published remarks on field work (Goffman 1989) he encourages becoming like those authentically in the scene to get the full dose of what participants experience.
22. These were from the University of Manitoba in 1976 and the University of Chicago in 1979. The latter must have been particularly sweet given his department's hesitancy about his PhD thesis.
23. A home with a view in the Berkeley hills was rather far from Malvina Reynolds writing about homes as "ticky tacky" little boxes in another part of the Bay area (Daly City).
24. When he writes of normal it is tongue in cheek even if he does not write "normal" or "so called normal" given his clear statement of how relative the concept is and how all are stigmatized and can have some identification with the feeling.
25. Burrowing deep within the crevices one can of course find exceptions, particularly early in his career. Note subsidies for his dissertation, research done for a gas company, funds from the military and indirectly elsewhere to research institutes and in the company of Rand corporation defense merchants.
26. That of course applies to individuals as well. Goffman (1971) offers the classic example of a psychiatrist who sleeps with his patient as part of the "therapy" and then sends her a bill.
27. Real stink bombs thrown during a high school gathering (Katz 2010) are another matter. Such acts would appear to do more for the psyche of the thrower than for social change.
28. A vein waiting to be mined is how Edward Shils (who was an early translator of Simmel) and who wrote on secrecy (Shils 1956) and civility (Shils 1997) influenced Goffman or maybe a bit the reverse. In 1952–1953 he was his research assistant. Shils worked for the OSS (Office of Strategic Services), the predecessor of the CIA. Jaworski (2023a) locates Goffman as a theorist informed by events of the Cold War.
29. Dmitri Shalin (2007a, 2007b, 2013, forthcoming) the founder of the Goffman Archives has a PhD from both Moscow and Columbia. He has done important work on how social, psychological, location and epoch aspects impact a scholar's work. Shalin's own work and interest in Goffman is a case in point given the deep role of deception, illusion, authoritarianism, show trials, double lives and fraudulent presentation in Russian history, politics, and literature. There are many levels –the official government policy narratives, the narratives regarding the impeccable lives and behavior of those in power and what may lie besotted beneath, unknown to varying degrees by subjects. Then for potential critics of course there is the formal, often cynical, obeisance they may offer and the care that must be taken with respect to whom they reveal their doubts, as well as in advancing (protecting) their dignity and/or self-interests, in opposition to the power.

30. This theme follows from a classic Hughes' paper on status dilemmas (Hughes 1944) and the work of Gerald Lenski (1954). From my 1961 Goffman class it sparked Marx (1962, 1967) a continuing interest in managing and defining authenticity. Another theme awaiting exploration is how Hughes' (1984) interest in mistakes at work informed Goffman's views of the fragilities, failures, and challenges of intentional and strategic interactions.
31. Again, there are exceptions. He did offer active support in 1970 for an initiative of Thomas Szasz's on behalf of the American Association for the Abolition of Involuntary Mental Hospitalization. During the annual sociology meetings in New York City in 1972 he attended a feminist sit-in at a restaurant only serving men at lunch. (Berger 1973). Whether Goffman was there as an observer or a supporter or some mixture is unclear. His work with the clearest political implications involves gender in 1971 and 1977.
32. In class Goffman was very critical of Merton lumping these diverse characters together in the same abstract box. He was much more tolerant of Parson's abstractions which, none-the-less, looked at choices actors made.
33. Goffman and Foucault had to have known about each other's work. Yet, neither appears to acknowledge the other (likely simultaneous discovery not plagiarism). R.D. Laing and Pierre Bourdieu were colleagues of both. Bourdieu appreciated Goffman and had a number of his books translated. *Asylums* was published in 1961 as was Foucault's *Folie et Deraison: Histoire de la folie a l'age* and in English as *The History of Madness* (1961), and a smaller mass paperback version in 1964. Foucault's *Surveiller et punir: Naissance de la prison* appeared in 1975 and in English in 1977 as *Discipline and Punish the Birth of the Prison*. Goffman lived in Paris for a period in 1951–1952 (Winkin 2022a) and had enough knowledge of French (growing up in a bi-lingual country and living in Paris) to evaluate PhD French language exams. There are comparative veins waiting to be surfaced here (e.g. Hacking 2004).
34. The student bohemian culture around the University of Chicago did not show the strong commitment to the left of those in sociology at CCNY and later Columbia. Why not? Perhaps because they were post WWII, more assimilated and had more time to see the failures of rigid ideologies.
35. This is the proverbial, "If you are not with us, you are against us." The same might be said by conservatives since he did not actively support the status quo, but it appears not to have been said.
36. In Marx (1994) I explore some of the issues raised by new technologies and manners. This is in a volume honoring Chicago trained Ralph Turner, one of my UCLA mentors. Work linking the collective behavior "public" in the Park-Blumer tradition Blumer 1957, Turner and Killan 1957 with Goffman's treatment of the term as accessible information immediately available to others who are physically present (e.g., *Relations in Public, Strategic Interaction*) awaits analysis. Goffman's interest in behavior *in* public is different from the former's interest in behavior *of* the public.
37. With respect to other to classics, in his first published paper (1951) he cites Weber on charisma, Simmel on fashion and Durkheim on collective symbols. In *Presentation* Durkheim is mentioned four times and Simmel and Park twice, but not Weber. In *Asylums* Durkheim is cited once, but strikingly no references to Weber's work on the totalizing aspects of bureaucracy, nor to Simmel. Analysis of references in his other papers would be revealing.
38. Carlin (2022), Marx and Muschert (2007), Marx (2017) discuss the need for such a field.
39. As well, note his resistance to being photographed or even to have his picture published when he ran for president of the American Sociological Association; the relative absence of direct personal examples, asides, or opinions in his teaching and writing (other than about the status of social research); few if any autobiographical details — even re prefaces, introductions to work he did; not revealing his personae during field work; and in the minimal self-promotion of his work and avoidance of interviews.

APPENDIX A

APPENDIX: A CAUTIONARY SOCIOLOGY OF INFORMATION
NOTE — ON BIOGRAPHY AND PRIVACY

To the living we owe respect, but to the dead we owe only the truth.

Voltaire

A brief note on the sociology of information. There are broader privacy, confidentiality, secrecy, and publicity issues around the borders of information control and discovery which any discussion of Goffman must confront. Face, mask, back and front stage, being on or off are anchored in the analytic elements of visibility (and more broadly accessibility to whatever sense is involved in taking in data external to the person).

Information “availability” can be literal, as in not blocked by the limiting of the unaided senses with respect to distance, darkness, time, and memory (van den Scott 2017), or the lack of perceptive or interpretive skills (e.g., language, medical diagnostic) or by “organizational holes” that prevent information sharing (Burt 1992). Norms, technology, properties of the information, context, and the physical environment, along with forgetting, distorting, and segmenting (Schwartz 2008; Zerubavel 2004) offer a jumbled gumbo of availability or not. This links to the need to continue the development of a broad ethics and sociology of information to which Goffman contributed so much.³⁸ This runs across levels of analysis (individual, small group, organizations, institutions, roles, means, goals, and contexts). An aspect of this involves the researcher discovering and communicating biographical information. Humility and the proverbial tentativeness of the scientist (if not the cynicism of the skeptic) is of the essence in writing about Erving Goffman. He was distrustful of biography and autobiography. The focus should be on the product, not the producer. In a 1976 letter to Irving Horowitz he wrote, “biography strikes me by way of trying to make a virtue of ... opportunism, affecting piety where self-respect should dictate chagrin” (Winkin 2022b, p. 164). He thought writing about the solidity of another’s corpus of work to be a “crude fallacy.” The fallacy involves thinking that at any current moment in a scholar’s working life, “the true nature and purposes of his doings can be unmasked, reconstituting how they are to be correctly understood, and predicting what can only come of them hereafter” (Goffman 1981c, p. 61). Nor did he seem to value self-reports — whether from subjects or researchers. As he told Verhoeven (1993, p. 322):

What an individual says he does, or what he likes that he does, has very little bearing very often on what he actually does. It seems to me that you can’t get a picture of anyone’s work by asking them what they do or by reading explicit statements in their texts about what they do. Because that’s by and large all doctrine an ideology ... if you just take a person’s version of what they do, you will end up with a very

superficial view of what goes on and, furthermore, you will then be contributing a statement that itself will act as a barrier to anyone else finding out what goes on.

Goffman was also unappreciative of autobiography. He told his student Gary Fine, who proposed doing a self-study of his own wedding, “only a schmuck studies his own life” (Fine 2009, p. 8).

Yet his reliance on the method of participant-observation and introspection suggests the contrary. It is hard to think of Goffman’s work apart from his own experiences and intuitions – whether in the Shetland Islands or with gambling, mental illness, status, embarrassment, or stigma. The light must blink yellow when introspection joins the memories of others about the individual.

The scholar, whether as biographer or field worker, confronts multiple freedom of inquiry and authenticity issues. These involve the concealment and revelation preferences of both researchers, subjects and the latter’s heirs. Under what conditions is an imbalance favoring the researcher acceptable?

Those who trade in other’s back stages and masks cannot expect to be beyond equivalent inquiry regarding their own. Rummaging around in the details of an intellectual career raises weighty issues. These are particularly relevant for Goffman. How does (and should) his deep interest in piercing informational and the interest of authors in analyzing his, connect to his being so extraordinarily protective of his own privacy? Consider his sealing of his unfinished papers and material in his archives.³⁹ When the archived memories of others are a source of data, particular caution regarding validity and propriety is needed. These vary depending on whether the subject is living or dead. The Goffman archives, which this article draws from, contain interviews that were voluntarily offered along with published materials. The archives’ board considered the privacy, confidentiality, and validity issues around disclosure of personal information (Marx, Cavan, and Shalin 2009). We identified questions and 12 principles applicable to biographical accounts.

In this article, using archives, personal experiences, and what I directly heard from others who knew him well, the major guiding ideas were common sense, proprietary, seeming facticity and direct relevance. Some relevant questions: is the person living or not?; is this a public figure?; does the subject make claims to truth that scholars are called upon to interrogate?; is the information in the public domain even if not widely known?; has it been ethically obtained?; does it appear to be factually correct?; will it harm the reputation of the person apart from the legitimate needs of scholarship?; how would revelation affect others such as family members or co-workers in the subject’s network?; is the revelation closely connected to understanding the person’s work? To understand the person do we need to get personal? Where the above factors lean against revelation is some higher, outweighing purpose served by revelation? Are the standards the same for the work vs. the person? There is a middle ground between the extremes of maximum openness and closure. As with so much, “it depends.”

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