

Goffman and Globalization: Strategic Interaction on a World Stage

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It is a common lament among sociologists that Erving Goffman, though his writings remain vibrant and widely read today, failed to spawn a coherent research tradition. His idiosyncratic methods of data collection, the uniqueness of his vision, and even his prickly personality have all been invoked to explain the lack of a Goffmanian school of research.

TWO TRADITIONS GROUNDED IN GOFFMAN

Nevertheless, several contemporary sociological traditions do explicitly draw inspiration from Goffman's theory. In my talk today I will compare and contrast two such theories, both of which address the phenomenon of globalization. On one hand, the world society variant of neo-institutionalist theory, associated with John Meyer and his colleagues at Stanford. On the other, my own approach to comparative global ethnography, as it developed during a study of the international casino industry. I will argue that the world society thesis is premised upon a reading of Goffman as a discursive theorist of cultural order, a reading which leads to an oversocialized conception of global actors as mere enactors of scripts. Global ethnography, in contrast, takes seriously Goffman's dramaturgical model of social life as a system of strategic interactions. An important consequence of these disparate readings of Goffman is divergent understandings of the relation between the front and back stage of social life. The world society thesis obliterates any such distinction; while for global ethnography it is the central dynamic driving national processes in the new world order.

I first discovered the relevance of Goffman's theory to my own research rather serendipitously, while doing ethnographic fieldwork as a casino dealer in order to study interactions among dealers, gamblers and pit bosses in a Nevada casino. One afternoon before work I stumbled upon Goffman's classic study of risk-taking, "Where the Action Is," an essay which evinces an insider's knowledge of the workings of a casino pit. It turns out that Goffman himself worked as a dealer in Nevada during the 1950's. As I read his essay, I was struck by how similar his experiences were to my own, by how little had changed in Nevada in the past 50 years. Dealing remained organized as a craft, while workers exercised autonomy on their jobs and pit bosses trusted dealers to guard the tables.

Now following my Nevada research, I had an opportunity to do another casino ethnography, this one in South Africa. It turned out that following the end of apartheid, the new government, the African National Congress had legalized gambling and licensed Las Vegas style casinos throughout the country. At first glance, this development seems entirely consistent with convergence theories of globalization, which predict that American-style institutions are diffusing throughout the world.

THE WORLD SOCIETY THESIS

In particular, John Meyer's world-society thesis offered a powerful explanation of the spread of Vegas style casino gambling. As explicated in an influential 1997 AJS article, this theory argues that it is not the greater efficiency of American forms which drive their diffusion, but the normative power of institutional scripts generated in the United States. To document this process, world society scholars have assembled an impressive array of evidence concerning the global standardization of education curricula, national constitutions and other formal documents.

Theoretically, world society scholars ground their argument in Goffman, generating what they call a macro-phenomenological approach to action and identity. It is macro in that it views identities as emerging relationally. It is phenomenological in that it opposes realist accounts which focus upon the interplay of power and interests. As Meyer et al state,

“The many individuals both inside and outside the state who engage in state formation and policy formulation are enactors of scripts rather more than they are self-directed actors. The social psychology at work is that of Goffman...emphasizing dramaturgical and symbolic processes in place of the hard-boiled calculation of interests assumed by rationalist actor-centric approaches” (Meyer et al. 1997: 150-1)

Goffman thus provides the world society story three essential components of a comprehensive theory. First, a **formal mechanism**. National elites are embedded in a global culture which negatively constrains but also positively guides their decisions. Second, a predictor of the **substantive content** of new global scripts. For just as Goffman argued that the social glue holding together modern society is a ritualistic respect for the individual, the world society thesis argues that the common content of emergent models is a respect for individual rights and freedoms. Third, Goffman offers a way to account for **empirical anomalies**. Should local practices not match the global script, the fault lies not with the actors, but with unintended consequences such as logistical problems involved in translating models into action, a phenomenon known as a decoupling.

ASSESSING DEGREE OF FIT

At first glance, the world society story fit the South African case quite well. While gambling had been prohibited during apartheid, ANC policy-makers would label gambling an individual freedom not to be proscribed by the state. And rather than sanctioning some form of indigenous gambling, the government explicitly modeled their new gambling industry on that of Nevada.

My findings, however, on how interactions played out on the casino floor in South Africa as opposed to Nevada couldn't have been different. While Las Vegas casinos are characterized by a high degree of trust between managers and dealers, South African casinos are replete with managerial suspicion of workers. As a result, casino work there is deskilled and intensely surveilled; while relations among dealers and gamblers are greatly strained, to say the least. In sum, on the ground, well below the level of policy and formal models, we find not convergence but divergence in the global gambling industry.

HOW TO EXPLAIN?

As I moved from describing these different gambling cultures, to explaining how they came into being, I also drew upon Goffman's insights, especially those elaborated in the monographs *Stigma* and *Strategic Interaction*. I argued that in both the US and South Africa, during key moments when gambling legislation was being debated, the symbolic meaning of casinos was up for grabs. Those opposed to casinos depicted them as impure, stigmatized enterprises. Casino proponents, rather than denying such stigmas, deployed various disidentifiers to deflect attention away from them. Gambling may not be the ideal business, they argued, but it creates jobs and stimulates the economy. And most importantly, in BOTH South Africa and the US, proponents deflected moral stigmas by linking casinos to a larger plan of

affirmative action for minority workers who suffered discrimination in mainstream sectors of the economy. Affirmative action quotas were set up for the casinos, and state agencies created to monitor the firms. The ultimate success of the affirmative action plans, however, differed greatly in the two countries. In South Africa, they were stringently enforced, but with perverse consequences, as casino operators distrusted the minority workers they were required to hire. This distrust translated into a contentious casino culture. In the United States, affirmative action goals were never enforced with much rigor, and so managers relied on personal networks to staff the casino floor with trusted confederates. The end result is cooperative casino culture, one which has persisted from the time of Erving Goffman's fieldwork, up to today.

TOWARDS A GOFFMANIAN THEORY OF GLOBALIZATION

What are the implications of these findings for how we understand globalization, and especially the ongoing relevance of Goffman's theoretical insights? I offer three, three axioms which I view as fundamental to a Goffmanian take on globalization. In doing so my aim is to reclaim Goffman's legacy from the new institutionalist tradition, to argue that Goffman allows us to theorize not just consensus and diffusion, but also conflict and differentiation. Taking seriously the distinction between frontstage versus backstage identities and actions is essential to this task.

FIRST POINT: THE SITUATION IS WHERE THE ACTION IS.

The first axiom I call, the situation is where the action is. As a methodological principle it states that we must study more than just the formal structure of institutions. In the world society story, the front-stage is the mental horizon of elites as they internalize global scripts.

What happens subsequently on the ground is relegated to the background of analysis. Ever the ethnographer, Goffman argued the converse, that the front-stage of social life is the situation, where individuals experience and negotiate objective structures within institutions. Rather than starting with the convergence of organizational forms and explaining as “decoupling” any divergence within them, a Goffmanian take on globalization takes the latter as a starting point for problematizing assumptions about the former.

SECOND POINT: SCRIPTS MAY BE GLOBALIZED, BUT ACTORS AND AUDIENCES STILL MATTER

The second axiom may be stated as: scripts may be globalized, but actors and audiences still matter. The world society thesis offers an oversocialized vision of actors. Global scripts, it argues, provide concrete roles and goals which constitute national actors who then quote “make valiant efforts to live up to the model.” Should actors fail to live up to the model despite their good intentions, decoupling once again comes to the rescue as an explanation why. In my research, however, I found it necessary to question this assumption that institutional actors are always sincere in their attempts to perform global scripts. Following the general propositions of Goffman’s dramaturgical framework, I argued that performers can be not only taken in by, but can also be cynical about their parts.

For example, while casino operators in both countries publicly acknowledged the legitimacy of employment equity for minorities, my ethnographic research revealed that, behind closed doors, these same individuals viewed their role as “responsible employers” with much cynicism. In the US, however, state regulators lacked the power and resources to make firms play this role; they were, in Goffman’s terms, a “weak audience” unable to influence the

performance. In South Africa, in contrast, strategic interactions between performing firms and regulatory audiences played out very differently. There, managers, though also cynical about their role as modern employers, faced a “strong” audience, that is, a gambling board which assiduously monitored their labor practices. The point is that a cross-national comparison allows us to recast decoupling, not as a gulf which opens spontaneously between the front and back stage of social life, but as an outcome of the successful management of institutional front and back stages. Nor were audiences simply “rationalized others” in the minds of elites, but specific regulatory agencies which varied in their capacity to monitor and discipline firms.

THIRD POINT: GLOBAL MODELS ARE RESOURCES AS WELL AS RULES

Our third axiom can be stated thus: global models are resources as well as rules. Rather than viewing the overarching “scripts” of individualism now disseminated globally as constraints upon action, we treat them as the terrain upon which struggles are now carried out. As Randall Collins, Philip Manning, and others have argued, Goffman’s theory is congruent with a conflict perspective on social life. Consequently, while we may find consensus concerning broad values and goals, there will be struggle over how adherence to these goals is defined and displayed. Over, that is, the expressive equipment of institutional interactions.

Consider an example from South Africa. Following the end of apartheid, public and private actors negotiated to decide upon a new system of categorizing citizens. Should the old system of classifying racial groups as white, black or coloured be retained? Should white women be counted as protected minorities, since they were discriminated against in some areas but not others during apartheid? And what about the expressive equipment through which employers would display adherence to new equity laws? Negotiations eventually settled upon

single-page quota charts which detail the percentage of non-whites in various occupational categories. Now, ten years later, these charts are being revised on the grounds that they in fact obscure the tokenization of non-whites, who experience a profound gulf between their dramatic and real power within organizations.

The point here is that models are not imported unreflexively from the outside. Because they will subsequently constitute the terrain upon which strategic interactions take place, these models will be treated as valuable resources by potential actors and audiences.

SUMMARY

To summarize, I've argued that far from being an idiosyncratic analysis of interpersonal interaction, Goffman's theory offers a powerful tool for analyzing the contemporary process of globalization. To illustrate, I've contrasted my own, micro-oriented approach to comparative ethnography with the institutional approach of the world society school. Both approaches take seriously Goffman's admonition to view reality as a relational construct, and to examine the meanings which emerge and circulate through these relations. I however have argued that we mustn't succumb to an oversocialized vision of global actors, lest we lose sight of the strategic character of institutional interactions as they emerge on a global stage.