Erving Goffman as a precursor to post-modern sociology

Charles D. Battershille

In *The Post-Modern Condition* Jean-François Lyotard (1984) footnoted Erving Goffman as one of his sources for likening institutions and society to rule-bound language games. How could Goffman be an integral resource for a 'post-modern' perspective on society? What does Lyotard’s appreciation of Goffman amount to? To answer these questions the present essay interprets Goffman in a manner opposed to the mainstream contemporary reassessment of his work, much of which deals with the structuralist aspects of his thought. In this paper we choose to draw out the sociological parallels between Goffman and two major theorists of post-modernism, Michel Foucault and Jean-François Lyotard.

Since his death, Goffman’s presidential address for the American Sociological Association on ‘The Interaction Order’ (1983a) has become a focal point of our efforts to understand and categorize his work. It may well become sociology’s final appraisal and encomium (Drew – Wootton 1988; Rawls 1987). Amidst the contemporary discussion of Goffman’s heritage, Randall Collins believes that ‘there is a major theory of literary form contained in Goffman’s works, waiting for exegesis’ (Collins 1986:110). It is best to leave a literary analysis of Goffman’s works to others, perhaps to textual analysts or deconstructionists who mostly comprise that family of thought known as ‘post-modernism’. Collins (1988) himself declined writing such an essay, perhaps out of an appreciation of the limits of North-American sociology.

In the 1970s, Goffman’s connection with contemporary French literary criticism and linguistics-oriented social theory was noticed (Jameson 1976; Frank 1979). At that time *Frame Analysis* (1974) unconventionally combined Wittgenstein, Bateson and semiotics to examine the organization of experience. Later, Goffman acknowledged the similarity of this method to post-modernism:
My belief is that the way to study something is to start by taking a shot at treating the matter as a system in its own right, at its own level, and, although this bias is also found in contemporary literary structuralism, there is an unrelated source, the one I drew on, in the functionalism of Durkheim and Radcliffe-Brown. It is that bias which led me to try to treat face-to-face interaction as a domain in its own right (Goffman 1981:62).

Post-modernism was generated by an explicit repudiation of the epistemological foundation of modernist thought. Goffman’s method, however, is more a result of a unique recombination of sociologically ‘classic’ modernist sources. The consequences of Goffman’s epistemology, of looking at social phenomena as having underlying structures, reach far beyond the current relegation of his contributions to the ‘interaction domain’.

The conceptual development from Goffman to Lyotard and Foucault is a replacement of concretized sociological entities, such as ‘persons’ and ‘institutions’, with relational concepts. More particularly, the person is seen as an effect of knowledge. Macro structures, including ‘society’, are understood as shifting islands of meaning based on subtly changing symbolic and interactive conventions. The conventional perception of reality as capturable in descriptive statements has been replaced with a view of social reality as sets of pragmatic meanings and discourses producing limited and overlapping senses of reality. Goffman’s writings on personhood and social organization bear evidence of the post-modern relational epistemology.

We will first sketch out the typical features of post-modernist sociological theory. Then we will show the confluences and disjunctures between Goffman and the post-modernism of Foucault and Lyotard. Space limitations necessitate focusing on Goffman’s central concepts and presuppose earlier sociological discussions of post-modernist theory (Denzin 1986; O’Neill 1986a, 1986b; Armstrong 1985; Offe 1985:276-9; Kroker 1984).

The nature and significance of post-modern sociology

Post-modern theory marks society’s transition from the industrial era to the ‘post-industrial’, ‘information’ era. As Max Weber foretold, rationalization marches inexorably on — into what we now term post-industrial conditions. The terms ‘post-industrial’ and ‘information
society' denote the salience of communication and knowledge in post-industrial society, as opposed to the industrial mode of production characteristic of modernist society (Kumar 1978).

Capitalism has evolved into a form of monopoly concentration whose search for markets has formed the 'consciousness industries' notable in contemporary life (Lasch 1979; Luke – White 1985) against the backdrop of greater bureaucratization and centralized organization (Presthus 1965; Drucker 1968; Hummel 1987). Since Philip Rieff's pioneering work, The Triumph of the Therapeutic (1958), it is increasingly common to analyze society as a therapeutic, welfare state, founded on improving the quality of life (Donzelot 1979; Lasch 1980; O'Neill 1986b, 1986c).

Foucault and Lyotard are central authors of this new theory and method in the social sciences and humanities. The central concerns of post-modernism deal with: (1) social organization and culture as epiphenomena of the production and consumption of knowledge in an information society, (2) personhood or 'the socially constructed subject', and (3) the putative humane and progressive nature of science. Institutions have created an environment of information which creates public communicative property and networks out of private lives. This information maps out the lifecourses or careers of persons today by establishing norms that are desirable and socially acceptable. Hence, knowledge in a post-industrial society is the vehicle of both personhood and progress.

The industrial era promised the diffusion of enlightenment and the scientific spirit throughout society while fostering the rise of 'the new middle class' of educated professionals and technocrats (Gouldner 1979). Lyotard rather sees the rise of pragmatic, reductive and self-referential knowledge, which only appears to uphold the modernist claims to an objective, indisputable truth value. The personal service ethos of a society organized around ' narcissistic' self-actualization (Lasch 1979, 1980) exemplifies the post-modern view of expertise. Bureaucracy itself is a self-contained, self-interested, self-referential meaning and interaction system (Hummel 1987). Science can no longer guide secularized society. It 'proceeds' by turning over its previous knowledge. Because science constantly refutes its past findings it is merely a type of discourse production (Lyotard 1984: 26) which cannot provide absolute truths for people's present and future self-reflection.
Modernist social theories presuppose science, art or religion as forming society into an identifiable ‘system or totality’. Lyotard’s main purpose is debunking this myth. His attack presents this belief as one of the dead ‘metanarratives’ of modernism, imputed conditions which made possible the study of man in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Values held in common by society members were assumed to be the basis for observing the ‘social’ nature of experience and conceiving of society as an entity, however conflicted or harmonious. Society, for Lyotard, is neither some functional whole nor some divided entity. Against the permutations in modelling society using these two variables, as represented in the works of Comte, Marx, Durkheim, Parsons and the Frankfurt School, society is viewed as overlapping networks of meaning and activity.

The dominant figures in this society are technocrats and other experts generating information – a pluralistic group whose efforts nonetheless converge on the imperative of increasing efficiency. As Lyotard put it, ‘scientific knowledge’ is a component of the wider agonistic organization because ‘in modern societies language games consolidate themselves in the form of institutions run by qualified partners (the professional class)’ (1984:25). Culture is composed of ‘pragmatic’, control-oriented discourses.

Information surrounds and forms consciousness in a segmented collage of discourse types. Culture is the knowledge propagated by different institutions. Without meaningful exception, people belong to or are involved with organizations and the services and information provided. These institutions are the government’s administrative and welfare agencies, business corporations, and life-improvement personal services. Rather than conceiving of society as lacking value integration, the modernist ‘anomie’, Lyotard sees that people are forced into a state of privatized, cognitive relativism by the permuting truth-values of the surrounding discourses.

Faith in the humane progress of science is therefore naive. This represents the second of Lyotard’s ‘dead metanarratives’. For knowledge serves to improve efficiency within an organization, improve control over members, and increase power over the external, operating environment. Being self-referential, expertise does not serve clients. This counters the modernist conceptions of an altruistic foundation for a scientifically and morally progressing society.¹

The third dead metanarrative outlined by Lyotard is the status of the person or ‘the subject’. The subject’s unitary nature was the
modernist metanarrative for social science. It was conceived as distinct from society. Lyotard’s ‘subject’ is not the concrete, modernist unit, but a relation: ‘A self does not amount to much, but no self is an island; each exists in a fabric of relations that is now more complex and mobile than ever before . . . one is always located at a post through which various kinds of messages pass’ (Lyotard 1984:15). The post-modern self is an interactive terminal, its unitariness an illusory effect of communicative process.

The post-modern critique of these metanarratives reveals the interconnection between knowledge, the subject and social control. The post-modern concept of the ‘de-centered subject’ promotes the conceiving of social organization as an inherent feature of ‘humane’ knowledge. The ‘subject’ is an effect of knowledge. Information is the verbal and written talk within the institutional practices generated for mass consumption. The ‘subject’ therefore denotes that people are products of particular specifications in culture formed by different agents at different times. If the person is a subject of and subject to information networks, then information is a form of social organization.

The ‘de-centered subject’ highlights the persistent myth of modernist society: the idea of potentially liberating self-understanding from social impositions. In modernism, social order was explained as the subject being penetrated by external forces, from socialization to false consciousness. It was also the basis for conceiving of organization and control as forces external to the person. Sociology was founded on the conception of subjects being members of society. That it could be seen as a cybernetic system or a stratified order, or any other sense of a finite, total entity, is due to the presumed existence of integrating mechanisms such as beliefs and values.

Post-modern ‘social order’ is the result of member’s apprehending various semiological codes in the public culture pertaining to situations and one’s self. Post-modernism warns of a de-politicized social order based on understanding human nature and social reality through information and images (O’Neill 1983). By dispensing information regarding norms and lifestyles, society produces a narrow range of attenuated forms of conformity and deviance. These have historically developed as the social control mechanisms specific to a highly individualistic age, coincident with class domination, whereby labour was rationalized under the ethos of personal fulfillment and freedom (Foucault 1979:209-24). Hence ‘human nature’ and potential are continually contested by the claims of experts and the mass media.
regarding essence, experiences and capacities. Medicine is the primary institution developed by society to control the historical emergence of the individual and personal freedom, through medical practices themselves and through the propagation of science-based norms which enter culture (Conrad 1979; Stoeckle 1984; Young 1987).

Foucault thus downplayed the role of class domination in social control. He argued that knowledge-based struggle for consciousness is the central control mechanism of Western societies organized to 'deliver' individuality and freedom (Foucault 1982:212). Hence, he defines 'the state' not in the modernist tradition as the caretaker of upper-class interests. The state is a cultural process 'in which individuals can be integrated, under one condition: that this individuality would be shaped in a new form, and submitted to a set of very specific patterns. In a way, we can see the state as a modern matrix of individualization' (Foucault 1982:214-5). Post-modern society is a system of systems rationalizing the organization of their human components. Lyotard acknowledges that present social conditions are part of the 'redeployment of liberal capitalism' (Lyotard 1984:38). Yet the production of consciousness toward increasing societal rationalization is given precedence over class domination by post-modern sociology. Culture is the barrage of messages regarding identity and worldview. Receiving these messages and reacting to them fix or 'center' individuals inside preconstituted forms of individuality. Hence, society is seen as a patchwork of institutions where experts manage social life through:

input/output matrices, following a logic which implies that their elements are commensurable and that the whole is determinable. They allocate our lives for the growth of power. In matters of social justice and truth alike, the legitimation of that power is based on its optimizing the system's performance-efficiency (Lyotard 1984:xxiv).

Social control occurs through the performative function of communication, rather than the informative, narrative function of communication. Knowledge rationalizes social control by organizing the experiencing subject.

In summation, then, the categories of 'subject', 'consciousness' and 'knowledge' are the quintessential elements of this new theory. Sensitivity to these same elements in sociological theory and in reality is evident in Goffman's works, prefiguring contemporary post-modern theory.
We address three aspects of this relationship. Our first discussion reveals how Goffman’s trademark, dramaturgy, and its central concept, the ‘definition of the situation’, anticipated Foucault and Lyotard’s model of knowledge-based social dynamics, termed ‘agonism’. The second part of this essay illustrates how the post-modern focus on consciousness and the ‘de-centered’ subject was anticipated by Goffman. His equating of the person with ‘team’, his concepts of ‘role distance’, the ‘career’, and mental illness reveal Goffman’s anticipation of Foucault and Lyotard’s position. The third discussion addresses the post-modernist lessons of Goffman’s famous ‘total institution’, and his associated critique of professional service and expert authority. The conclusion of this essay discusses Goffman’s critique of sociological practice and theory. His celebrated cynicism and elusiveness are understood as the character traits of the post-modern sociologist.

Dramaturgy as a precursor of post-modernism

Goffman’s Presentation of Self was one resource Lyotard used in conceiving of society as overlapping sets of game-like behaviours and meanings. The ‘observable social bond is composed of language ‘moves’” wrote Lyotard (1984:11). From Wittgenstein, Lyotard derives the notion of the rule-bound nature of speech acts and meaning. Lyotard is thus equipped to appreciate the ‘agonistic’ (agon is ancient Greek for combat) nature of post-modern society. Modernist societal membership is reconceived as taking part in different meaning-language games:

Each language partner, when a ‘move’ pertaining to him is made, undergoes a ‘displacement’, an alteration of some kind that not only affects him in his capacity as addressee and referent, but also as sender. These ‘moves’ necessarily provoke ‘countermoves’ — and everyone knows that a countermove that is merely reactional is not a ‘good’ move (Lyotard 1984:16).

Lyotard then argues that interpersonal moves occur on a larger ‘scale’, characterizing ‘the social’ as ‘flexible networks of language games’. Organizations are entities whose boundaries ‘are themselves the stakes and provisional results of language strategies, within the institution and without’ (Lyotard 1984:17).
In this theory people occupy places in organizations and culture, receiving and transmitting information in interlocking communication channels. Since institutions represent different discourses or 'language games', citizens become 'language partners' following the rules of communication. Lyotard terms this buffeting inherent within information channels 'agonism'. By perceiving interchanges of speech as moves and counter-moves within a game, agonism acquires sociological relevance as a perpetual contest or an interactive social process.

Goffman's view of man as inherently strategic is an obvious prototype of Lyotard's view of game-like behavior. In dramaturgy man is a manager, managing the evaluation of himself in other's eyes by intentionally 'giving' and unintentionally 'giving off' certain information. *The Presentation of Self* illustrated processes of experiencing and affecting the social world, used by members in interpreting normal and abnormal situations and making inferences about the people found there. For Goffman, social life is a process of consciously and unintentionally generating information to influence others. Those others receive this information and its meaning for them, and react in turn by transmitting information for immediate and long term benefit. Goffman wrote:

> Regardless of the particular objective which the individual has in mind and of his motive for having this objective, it will be in his interests to control the conduct of others, especially their responsive treatment of him. This control is achieved largely by influencing the definition of the situation which the others come to formulate, and he can influence this definition by expressing himself in such a way as to give them the kind of impression that will lead them to act voluntarily in accordance with his own plan (Goffman 1959:3-4).

That people define situations with impression management is consistent with Lyotard and Foucault's idea that social organization is the agonistic action-reaction of information reception and transmission.

Goffman's view of man as an information manager in *Strategic Interaction* (1969) is consistent with his earlier discussion of strategy in *The Presentation of Self*, and, germane to Lyotard's ideas about social organization. Goffman used 'game theory' to isolate the complicated interdependencies of individuals coexisting in organizations. He recognized that people most often play for the organization under the official banner and common purpose, while exploiting opportunities to play for themselves. These are strategic moves in the self and/or collective interest game of an organizational society. Goffman describes the 'move' as a structured course of action available to a player, which,
'when taken, objectively alters the situation of the participants. Some of the moves are concealed, some visible...’ (Goffman 1969:145). Making moves selfishly and altruistically (strategically if the former appear as the latter) is, of course, a normal feature in the ‘give and take’ of life.

Lyotard’s concept of bureaucracy is consistent with what Goffman, in *The Presentation of Self*, termed ‘role enterprise’. Lyotard’s bureaucracy is a state of relatively stable situational definitions, meanings, and interaction patterns. With ‘role enterprise’ Goffman denoted the development of new institutions from new definitions of situations. Altering the situational definition in a bureaucracy exemplifies the agonistic ‘social order’ for Lyotard. Goffman’s equivalent is the process whereby nascent professionalism introduces new meanings and situations to an industrializing society. Accordingly, the medical profession is a central example in *The Presentation of Self* and the example, *par excellence*, of strategic self-presentation.

We see that Lyotard’s thought approximates the key concept of Goffman’s entire sociology, the ‘definition of the situation’, otherwise known as the W.I. Thomas theorem. This theorem was memorably explicated in Goffman’s *Frame Analysis*. That the prevailing definition of the situation is social reality, Goffman warned, was ‘true as it reads but false as it is taken’ (1974:1). Goffman argued against the prevailing views of the symbolic interactionists that meaning is embedded in situations, not created anew in each interaction:

> Presumably, a ‘definition of the situation’ is almost always to be found, but those who are in the situation ordinarily do not *create* this definition, even though their society often can be said to do so; ordinarily, all they do is to assess correctly what the situation ought to be for them and then act accordingly (Goffman 1974:1-2).

Orienting to the situation rather than negotiating meaning is, we argue, a post-modern stance predicated upon the perception of persons as subjects in and of various knowledge fields. The primacy of a socially derived knowledge structure over individual consciousness de-centers the modernist subject (Jameson 1976).

The rise of science and industrialism permitted the middle classes to use their education as credential-based resources for the modernist view of the society-wide struggle known as stratification (Bledstein 1976; Larson 1977). Goffman effectively understood that the scientific, pseudo- and quasi-science scripts for these definitions of
personal service resulted from broader social processes of rationalization and differentiation.

For Lyotard and Goffman the prevailing definition of the situation has precedence over the individual’s putative meaning construction activities. Yet on the wider structural canvas sociology has well documented how bureaucracies and professions are involved in agonistic behavior. Change is managed in ways least threatening to organizational definitions of situations, to their ‘pragmatic’ knowledge which rationalizes control internally over members and externally over clients. Lyotard utilizes Goffman to illuminate ‘social types’; both as institutions and as the cognitive assessment of the prevailing definition of a situation.

We must note that Goffman’s bureaucracy is a modernist conception relative to Lyotard’s. Goffman’s fieldwork deals with concrete institutions. Lyotard’s bureaucracy is a changing pattern of interaction based on changing game rules. To Lyotard, institutional definitions of situations ‘filter discursive potentials’ and ‘privilege’ other types of statements (1984:17). Yet Goffman also discusses bureaucracy in terms of historical changes in consciousness. In addition, his equation of bureaucracy with encounters as dependent upon certain attentions and disattentions (1961b:17-25) supports Lyotard’s idea regarding the nature of society as agonistic communication. The organizational scale of social settings varies with the filtering of discursive potentials.

Strategy, the definition of the situation and role enterprise are important aspects of dramaturgy consistent with Lyotard’s work. These concepts constitute the process of agonism.

**Goffman’s anticipation of the post-modern ‘subject’**

Goffman illuminates the agonistic organization of a society where strangers coexist in organizations dedicated to achieving a common goal. Social organization has many orbits, from intrapersonal to bureaucratized organization; all presuppose the individual’s capacity for maintaining one definition of the situation. Such maintenance is known as ‘team’ playing. Team playing is based on specific rational action and generic control over the information by which strangers, the acquainted, peers, family and bosses judge one’s instrumental action, appearances and one’s moral composure.
Goffman identifies the central interpersonal teams as the family and the work-place team. We have already characterized work-place team activity as essentially agonistic. Disturbances in the family team are the basis for Goffman’s explanation of the de-centered self as a product of a social network. Beneath interpersonal team organization is intrapersonal team organization. To Goffman, although the person is built up of social experience, it does not become a thing in and of itself. Rather, it is a one-member team whose audience and performer components constantly interact in any situation. Indeed, The Presentation of Self emphasizes that self-control of persons is necessary in order to be optimally involved in their own performance and not detract from the impression they seek to make on others.

The origin of the team concept is rooted in Goffman’s adaptation of G.H. Mead and Sigmund Freud. The Freudian metapsychology of id, ego and superego provided a model of the self as a communication team. These structures constitute an audience and actor structure of extra-personal teams. Psychoanalytic symptoms (Goffman 1959: 80-1; 1961b:24) disclose the unequal ability of one internal actor-audience to live with another. Psychoanalytic views of contested intrapsychic communication were examples of extra-personal strategy, guile, deceit and irony for Goffman.

It is therefore interesting that Randall Collins (1986) laments the absence of a Goffman treatise on Freud. Although Goffman brought an expertise in Freud from the University of Toronto, where he did his bachelor’s degree, to graduate school in Chicago, it seemed to have had no major impact on his work. We suggest that Goffman transformed the Freudian idea of intrapsychic communicative relations into a post-modern view of subjects as embedded in communicative networks.

Mead’s concept of the person socialized in accordance with broad demands of the ‘generalized other’ was and remains a crucial insight about the genesis of self. Yet Goffman’s revision reflected the fact of multiple relationships in a society which was faster and more complex than in Mead’s day. The following passage is evidence that Goffman presupposed the agonistic model of society in understanding the person as a product of various social situations. Regarding the universal nature of deference and demeanor as micro-level social norms, he wrote in 1956 that:

The Meadian notion that the individual takes toward himself the attitude others take to him seems very much an oversimplification. Rather the
individual must rely on others to complete the picture of him of which he himself is allowed to paint only certain parts . . . . While it may be true that the individual has a unique self all his own, evidence of this possession is thoroughly a product of joint ceremonial labor (Goffman 1967:84-5).

Goffman's person is built up by meeting time and person-specific responsibilities, at a pace beyond Mead's specification. Moreover, the social conditions generating the person become the agonistic society. For the person is generated by many, often conflicting, specific roles, both impersonal and personal.

Goffman's utilization of the post-modern conception of society is evident in his description of the fragmented nature of consciousness and culture. He argued that 'A snap-shot view is part of what informs my approach because indeed there is in part a snap-shot character to the way we are lodged in life' (Goffman 1981:68). This realization made his work on the person, neo-Meadian and hence, post-modern. Goffman accepted the self as a reflection and product of social experience. But, updated for the information era, the crucial experience is the agonism of communication networks.

Thus *The Presentation of Self* reworked Mead's notion of 'generalized other', given its underestimation of the number and exaggeration of the depth of many relationships. Not only are there as many others as role relations, but they are transitory and even more impersonal when mediated by communication technology and formal organization. This organization of social experience is known by Goffman as the 'career'.

Goffman's concept of career is an extension of the 'team' concept. In normal and abnormal lives, the career was the social network producing Goffman's person:

Each moral career, and behind this, each self, occurs within the confines of an institutional system, whether a social establishment such as a mental hospital or a complex of personal and professional relationships. The self, then, can be seen as something that resides in . . . the pattern of social control that is exerted in connection with the person by himself and those around him (1961a: 168).

A person's life career has many organizational settings. Because culture is a patchwork of different discourse sites, the career is the record of various institutional-specific information transmissions and receptions. The self-exerted control noted by Goffman refers, in the post-modern interpretation, to the acquired pattern of self-communication.
In his career the person becomes a processed, typified object of administrative design. Foucault is famous for advancing the perspective of the historical transformation of power from external coercion to the subtle, insinuative structuring of the individual through on-site communication and general cultural influence. Particularly in *Discipline and Punish* he showed this knowledge to be the disciplines of education, psychiatry and medicine. The sciences of man which began to develop in the eighteenth century refounded social organization and power. Since that time, ‘an increasingly better invigilated process of adjustment has been sought after — more and more rational and economic — between productive activities, resources of communication, and the play of power relations’ (Foucault 1982:219). Foucault’s position on knowledge and social relationships in today’s personal service and information society overlays Goffman’s neo-Meadian agonistic processes of self and interaction.

Displaying internal consistency, Goffman’s concept of ‘role distance’ had, by the early 1960s, generated a prototype of post-modernism’s ‘de-centered subject’. Indeed, ‘role distance’ shows the social construction of the self as a web of relationships. This was rather dramatically illustrated when Goffman argued that even at the height of an operation, a surgeon expresses himself as a social creature other than arbiter of life or death: ‘identificatory demands are not created by the individual but are drawn from what society allots him. He frees himself from one group, not to be free, but because there is another hold on him’ (Goffman 1961b:139). Goffman explains that we are so enmeshed that no obligation can be privileged more than another: ‘the lightness with which the individual handles a situated role is forced upon him by the weight of his manifold attachments and commitments to multi-situated social entities’ (1961b:142). For Goffman, then, role transgression is a fundamental social requirement. Distance from the role is less an issue of motivation than an agonistic property of society.

To Goffman the modernist assumptions of traditional role theory reify personal organization as the taken-for-granted person. His critique emphasizes the self as cross-over points between communication networks: ‘When seen up close, the individual, bringing together in various ways all the connections that he has in life, becomes a blur’ (Goffman 1961b:143). Hence, he appreciates that individuality is a personal style in role scheduling, a ‘great theme of social organization’ (1961b:151). The individual in Goffman’s theory is a prototype of the post-modern subject for it is not the commonsense object of realist
epistemology. Those experiences which generate the personal sense of uniqueness Goffman reveals to be properties of communicative processes. Individuality, then, is a characteristic pattern of informational processing in receiving and sending modes.

In *Relations in Public* Goffman further refined his view of the subject as an information transmitter-receptor. As a ‘person’ the subject is a public object, encoded in the actions of others toward it. The ‘self’ is a patterned series of actions towards others (Goffman 1971:341). Others ‘read off’ the ‘self’ forming the ‘person’: ‘The self is what can be read about the individual by interpreting the place he takes in an organization of social activity, as confirmed by his expressive behavior’ (1971:366). Failure to stay to one code of ‘self’ threatens others’ ‘reciprocal’ codings of that ‘person’. Such a radical revision of communicational pattern is Goffman’s post-modern position (Goffman 1971:366). Goffman’s later discussion of ‘back-channel communication’ (1981) was consistent. The earlier ‘definition of the situation’ had been translated, in the 1970s, into the semiological terms of decoding encoded information. When not faulty, that is, ‘ill’, the self is the medium which separates internal or external noise from the message.

Goffman’s writing on mental illness expanded on the organizational nature of the ‘subject’. Insanity inhibits the individual’s ability and willingness to give respect to others due them as members of a society where interactional respect is an important component of social organization. Breaking these rules is organizationally problematic for society as a moral entity. Here, however, Goffman employed a unified society metanarrative. Interactive respect is the main mechanism integrating society. This modernist device is, of course, one aspect of Goffman’s Durkheimian heritage (Goffman 1959:69; 1971:65). However, Goffman’s study of mental illness further explicates the embedded nature of selves in the interaction networks of family and other teams.

Goffman’s writing on stigma concisely illustrates a relational conception of social organization. Persons are less ‘concrete’ entities than temporary positions in an interaction network. Normality and stigma are:

> a pervasive two-role social process in which every individual participates in both roles, at least in some connections and in some phases of life. The normal and the stigmatized are not persons but rather perspectives... since interaction roles are involved, not concrete individuals, it should come as no surprise that in many cases he who is stigmatized in one regard nicely exhibits all the normal prejudices held toward those who are stigmatized in another regard (1963b:138).
Thus stigma further illustrates the post-modern perspective on identity as constituted by communicative patterns.

In modernist terms, the stigmatized exemplify an extreme of self-awareness, a hyper-attentiveness to the situation which is disrupted by their presence. In public the stigmatized usually work hard to avoid disrupting the situation with their physical presence (1963b:75-82). In private, they relax this self-management to live among their own kind, the sympathetic and others marginal to the mainstream. They learn not to demand symmetrical communication with ‘normals’. This self-awareness is a fact of life and interaction because all people bear the collective moral abhorrences of the Durkheimian social entity. Additionally, the team-nature of personhood is the origin of the dramaturgical abilities necessary to maintain stable interactions. Normal tact is the result of persons being both actors and audiences for their own and for others’ performances (Goffman 1959:229-36). The extreme social situation of the stigmatized requires no more than the normal organizational techniques to manage.

However, beyond the modernist grounding in the body and the conscience collective, acquiring ‘tact’ is a product of an agonistic communication system. The post-modern interest in stigma is drawn to the relational nature of apparently concrete entities. Goffman presents the normal and the abnormal as binary modes of agonistic social organization. Stigma is not a concrete ‘thing in itself’: ‘it should be seen that a language of relationships, not attributes is really needed. An attribute that stigmatizes one type of possessor can confirm the usualness of another, and therefore is neither creditable nor discreditable as a thing in itself” (1963b:3). Therefore, it is not mock-significant or eccentric that Goffman described the joint presence of stigmatized and normals as one of the ‘primal scenes of sociology’ (1963b:13).

The total institution and the ‘bureaucratization of the spirit’

Examining extreme careers, such as mental illness, the stigmatized, and the asylum inmate, put into sharp relief the organizational features of the life careers of ‘normal’ subjects. Goffman was led to understand social control as the normal pitch or state of organizational techniques.
The comparison between Goffman’s total institution and Foucault’s idea of the ‘disciplinary society’ is too extensive to pursue in detail here. We will restrict ourselves to the nature of bureaucratic people-processing and helping, humane personal service in our society.

Selections from (or consideration of) Goffman’s Asylums commonly appear in organizational theory textbooks (Hall 1982; Grussky – Miller 1981; Haas – Drabek 1973; Etzioni 1969). These management-oriented textbooks extrapolate membership in a goal-seeking organization from his writing on the mental hospital inmate. It is no coincidence that this fact adumbrates the managerial imperative to control, or rationalize, its internal environments.

Total institutions control the work, sleep, eating and play of their inmates to affect an overall change in their behavior and beliefs. Goffman’s fieldwork revealed the psychiatric front as screened-over layman’s thinking about insanity: ‘psychiatry embodies and rationalizes lay attitudes toward this aspect of conduct, instead of carrying us beyond those conceptions’ (Goffman 1963a:232). He is famous for arguing that medical-psychiatric service does not serve the patient’s interests but creates their deviance to justify its existence.

Goffman observed how the undesirable changes forced on inmates were taken as evidence of the necessity of corrective service. The continued presence of symptoms proves not the reality of mental illness but the medical control over the definition of mental illness (1961a:386). Goffman’s critique of professionalism and expert knowledge, the last essay in the collection of essays entitled Asylums, shows an awareness that knowledge about the subject was created for control purposes. Goffman’s discussion of this reductionism in which persons are reduced to serviceable objects is entirely consistent with Foucault’s uncovering of the perpetual operation of public, managerial-oriented knowledge to control the disorganizing forces of sexuality (1980) and inefficiency at work, learning or punishment (1979).

Goffman undercuts the functionalistic and altruistic ideology of the organizing and helping knowledge. The detection of deviance in the total institution is a perpetual endeavor in the same way that the inmate’s visibility in the Panopticon-style prison efficiently brings out compliance. Moreover, deviance is also detected in the work of Foucault’s professionals who control the various forms of social involvements. The systemic bias contradicting the modernist assumption of service becomes evident in Goffman’s research: ‘the staff problem is to find a crime that will fit the punishment’ (1961a:85).

Moreover, Goffman is aware of the systemic imperatives of medicine as manager or overseer of the productive capacities of individuals and populations (1961a:349), applying therapies so that ‘inmates must be caused to self-direct themselves in a manageable way’ (1961a:87). The pervasiveness of such people-processing forced Goffman to equate totalitarianism, the total institution, and ‘free society’ (1961a:320). Except for the terminology and the research methods, Foucault’s findings are similar regarding the ‘political anatomy’ of the disciplinary society.

Our contemporary ‘disciplinary society’ began as the widespread bureaucratic technique first generated in specific locales for disease control, army discipline or poorhouse efficiency. According to Foucault, these organizational techniques today frame, construct, and rationalize life by ‘optimizing forces, aptitudes, and life in general without making them [individuals] more difficult to govern’ (Foucault 1980:141). The self-discipline required for a successful lifecourse and occupation internalizes what mental hospitals and reform schools provide through regimentation and constant supervision. What was punishment prior to the industrial revolution is self-improvement in the post-industrial world. Punishment, Foucault wrote, is ‘not essentially different from ... curing or educating’ because it is generically the same social control, receiving the ‘sanction of technique and rationality’ (1979:303).

In the historical march of rationalization, various forms of people-organization produced ‘disciplined’ members. The generic pervasiveness of Goffman’s total institution is tantamount to Foucault’s ‘disciplinary society’. The ‘bureaucratization of the spirit’ (Goffman 1959:57) betokens a disciplined society. The phrase belies the subtle organizational forces of today’s world operating through both the formal knowledge of an information society and the informal knowledge constituting the person’s interactive competence.

The normal membership restraints of dramaturgy are not far from a ‘persistent conscious effort’ required to stay within the boundaries allowed inmates (Goffman 1961a:43) or from the citizen’s inculcated aptitudes. Hence, Goffman’s writing on the ‘interaction order’ is the foundation of the subtle organizational techniques outlined to different degrees by both Goffman and Foucault which operate in present
society. We therefore perceive a double-edged meaning of 'membership', as that of inmate and citizen. This is the post-modern contribution of Goffman's writing on the total institution.

Conclusion: Goffman on sociological practice and theory

Goffman considered sociological practice in his time to presume the existence of the commonsense unit known as society: "the reference unit, "American society"... is something of a conceptual scandal, very nearly a contradiction in terms" (1971:xv). Given Lyotard's terminology, Goffman would criticize the sociological codings of society as one set of truth-claiming discourses, and see meaning and truth as relative to discourse production. Goffman's insight on 'post-modern' social order (very nearly a contradiction in terms) is predicated upon the subject's orientation to delimited frames of meaning, without the modernist society-integrating device of common values.

Goffman locates social order not in shared values, class domination, or macro-level cybernetic processes but in 'remedial interchanges'. They are invariant features of Western societies. These interpersonal rituals, 'accounts, apologies and requests' (Goffman 1971:330) are forms of talk inserted into the situation when the actor realizes that explanation is needed to clarify his position. While interactions almost always presuppose the consensus of what the definition of situation is, Goffman and the post-modernists do not presume this condition to obtain at the macro level.

We suggest that Goffman largely transcended the conventions of a sociology which either claims him for its own or which finds him wanting. He is criticized as a bourgeois micro-sociological apologist by conflict oriented macro-sociological theorists (Gouldner 1970; Dawe 1973; McNall - Johnson 1975; Munch 1986) or understood as underpinning functionalism with symbolic interactionist research (Burrell - Morgan 1979).

Alvin Gouldner argued that Goffman advocates and indexes the middle-class retreat from a world of frustrations into superficial aesthetics (Gouldner 1970). A more recent criticism claims Goffman is a conservative in the 'typically American' ideological mold because dramaturgy underestimates the 'conflict which is ever-present as a
latent relationship between pure individuality and binding social order. In a view of a smoothly functioning mutual accommodation in a permanent process of staging and negotiation’ (Munch 1986:54). According to Munch, Goffman’s conservative theory is devoid of real persons who, if present, would righteously criticize our stratified society’s invidious classifications and lack of social justice.

However, Goffman does not share the modernist presuppositions of these critics. Thus Goffman would question the conventional sociological versions of persons coming to sublime self and social knowledge where they achieve Munch’s Kantian ‘inner freedom of universal morality’. The conventional sociological version of the enlightened, self-interested person as justice seeking is a modernist concept which Goffman eschewed.

Goffman’s work neither ignored the historical nature of a class society nor underestimated the structural limits on meaning negotiation. Goffman examined deeper levels of social organization than social class. Approached through the subject’s consciousness, Goffman’s view of society is agonistic: his writings depict subjects struggling with typifications, strategizing and maintaining definitions of situations. For this reason his work by-passes Marxian categories and looks at more fundamental bases of social order. This approach was justified in what we understand as post-modern terms in Frame Analysis:

The analysis developed does not catch at the differences between the advantaged and disadvantaged classes and can be said to direct attention away from such matters. I think that is true. I can only suggest that 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 to provide a lullaby, but merely to sneak in and watch the way people snore (Goffman 1974:14).

Goffman seemed committed at least to liberal if not radical views of social order and justice. But he approached class society in terms of its cognitive and behavioral quiescence. ‘The great sociological question’, he noted, is ‘How come persons in authority have been so overwhelmingly successful in conning those beneath them into keeping the hell out of their offices?’ (1971:288n). By the end of his career, Goffman claimed that the critical purpose served by his whole corpus is the questioning of official, normal versions of reality (1983a:17). Goffman’s critique was consistent with the post-modern concern with consciousness and rationalization.

Dramaturgy does not, as Dawe argued, reduce life to the trivialities of ‘public styles and manners’ (1973:248). Nor is it fair to say that
Goffman's sociology is more about himself than society, that the 'style becomes the medium and the message' (Manning 1976:21). And the message is not that life is 'mercenary' (Posner 1978:36). To the extent that the aesthetics of appearance is self-managed comportment then the social organization maintained by appearance is social control. Goffman's dramaturgy, capturing the present bureaucratization of the spirit, reveals that he has largely transcended the conventions of the modernist sociology by which he is found wanting. Hence Randall Collins' (1986) claim that *The Presentation of Self* is an anthropological study of class culture is acceptable only within the parameters of modernism. Goffman's revamping of the 'subject' is here understood as a response to the dangers inherent in the modernist conception of self. The unitary self of realist epistemology is the precondition for the antinomy of public and private. This permits theorizing about social control as imposed from without. In post-modernist society order is less an imposing structure of domination than a personal disposition. Thus, Goffman's phrase, the 'bureaucratization of spirit', represents social order as the struggle against one's place as subject and object in communicational networks.4

Goffman anticipated Foucault's post-modern political criticism. Foucault specified that the 'analysis, elaboration, and bringing into question of power relations and the "agonism" between power relations and the intransitivity of freedom is a permanent political task inherent in all social existence' (Foucault 1982:223). Such criticism entails exposing struggles for and of subjection, of understanding processes whereby personal experience is generated. Goffman did this.

Goffman is the theorist of the total institution writ large as the corporate-welfare-personal service society. Goffman views societal membership as a combat-like game with the principles and proponents of these knowledge bodies. The bulk of his work portrays members inextricably engaged in a struggle to be more or less than their official identities. Even when expert knowledge does not come into play, persons remain subject to the coded information about meaning and interactions.

Goffman's work proceeded without the modernist assumptions of: (1) humane science as progressive, benevolent and altruistic and (2) the unitary subject. To a lesser extent his writings have overcome the modernist assumption (3) that societies are some sort of totality or entity.
Notes

1. This rationalization molds the conscious orientation to the world: ‘we are under continual and subtle social pressures to be rationally critical’ (Parsons 1954: 37). These rational forces have become normal, laudable and politically neutral aspects of collective consciousness in the information society (Lane 1966). These modernist sociologists have unwittingly described aspects of the role of knowledge in the post-modern society.

2. The best expression of the social system’s functional imperatives was achieved by Talcott Parsons. Parsons wrote that with the development of industrialization, urbanism, high technology, mass communications ‘... there has been a general upgrading to higher levels of responsibility. Life has necessarily become more complex and has made greater demands on the typical individual, though different ones at different levels’ (1964:281).

3. The pervasiveness of self-control which Foucault determined was experienced not as imposition but as responsibility and personal growth is magnified in Goffman’s view of the ‘depressed patient’. In this state, the spirit does not sustain its own bureaucratization, a ‘constantly exercised option’ for normals: depressed persons come to appreciate consciously how much social effort is in fact required in the normal course of keeping one’s usual place ... the plight of finding everything just too much of a drag is not to be attributed solely to an intrapsychic factor, but also to the fact that social place is organized so that some special effort is always required to maintain it (1971: 388-9).

Post-modernist exegesis would not make the manic-depressive the anti-hero of bureaucratic domination. But it would recognize Goffman’s sensitivity to post-modern social conditions.

4. Today we may thus understand Goffman’s celebrated cynicism as scorn for the modernist humanitarian self, Foucault’s subjected knowledge object. On individual uniqueness, Goffman writes that the ‘term unique is subject to pressure by maiden social scientists who would make something warm and creative’ out of it, a something not to be broken down, at least not by sociologists’ (Goffman 1963b:56).

References

Armstrong, David

Bledstein, Burton J.

Burrell, Gibson — Gareth Morgan

Collins, Randall
Anthony Wootton (eds.), *Erving Goffman: Exploring the Interaction
Order*, 41-63.

Conrad, Peter
1979 ‘Types of Medical Social Control’, *Sociology of Health and Illness*

Dawe, Alan
1973 ‘The Underworld-view of Erving Goffman’, *British Journal of Sociology*
24:246-53.

Denzin, Norman K

Donzelot, Jacques

Drew, Paul – Anthony Wootton
Press.

Drucker, Peter F.

Etzioni, Amitai

Foucault, Michel
Vintage.
1982 ‘The Subject and Power’, in: Hubert L. Dreyfus – Paul Rabinow,
*Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics*, 208-226.

Frank, Arthur W., III
1979 ‘Reality Construction in Interaction’, *Annual Review of Sociology*
5:167-91.

Giddens, Anthony
1987 ‘Erving Goffman as a Systematic Social Theorist’, in: *Social Theory and

Goffman, Erving
Goffman as a precursor to post-modern sociology

Gonos, George

Gouldner, Alvin W.

Grusky, Oscar – George A. Miller (eds.)

Haas, J. Eugene – Thomas E. Drabek

Hall, Richard H.

Hummel, Ralph P.

Jameson, Frederic

Kroker, Arthur

Kumar, Krishan

Kurzweil, Edith

Lane, Robert E.

Larson, M.S.

Lasch, Christopher


Lytard, Jean-Francois
Manning, Peter K.

McNall, Scott G. – James C.M. Johnson

Munch, Richard

Offe, Claus

O’Neill, John

Parsons, Talcott

Posner, Judith

Presthus, Robert

Rawls, Anne Warfield

Rieff, Philip

Sedgwick, Peter

Stoeckle, John D.

Young, Allan