

Erving Goffman and Ulrich Beck:
Interaction Order or New World Order?
A Spirited Attempt to Put Two Theorists in Conversation
Who Never Wanted to Be

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INTRODUCTION

“Erving Goffman is the quintessential sociologist of everyday social life,” says Ann Branaman in her introductory essay to *The Goffman Reader*.¹ Indeed, such a bland descriptor is accurate, if deceiving in its simplicity. To attempt drawing a comparison between Goffman, concerned with the minute details of personal interaction void of explicit political implications, and the inevitably political Ulrich Beck, who has recently redefined how we conceive of international relations and global society in the wake of new, unforeseen scares, seems not just unfeasible, but somehow unfair. Instead, one could easily argue Beck deserves comparison against Marx, with whom he obviously seems to be in conversation. His theorizing on the futures of European states post-globalization serves to, in Beck’s own words, “[reverse] Marx’s judgment.”²

Why, then, is such a comparison the precise aim of this paper? Certainly, Goffman intended his work to be used in analyzing face-to-face interactions and presentations of self, not the interactions of modern states. Beck, on the other hand, does concern himself with the individual, but mainly in the context of a changing, reflexively modernizing world. Yet, the two theorists share more commonalities than one might initially glimpse—the most central of which is the discussion of the management of risk (in Goffman’s context, *impression management*) by bodies interacting in dynamic scenarios. While we should be sure to acknowledge limitations derived from scale and epoch, we can render a meaningful

¹ Erving Goffman, Charles C. Lemert, and Ann Branaman, *The Goffman reader* (Cambridge, Mass: Blackwell, 1997), 1.

² Ulrich Beck, *World risk society* (Malden, MA: Polity Press, 1999), 3.

conversation between these two theorists, on the topics of risk management, nature, individuality, and social change.

IMPRESSION MANAGEMENT AND RISK MANAGEMENT

In his 1952 essay “On Cooling the Mark Out: Some Aspects of Adaptation to Failure,” Goffman describes the self as a collection of values and attributes associated with a recognizable character, put on by a performer in a social situation. He notes that the self is susceptible to failure in the case that the performance may not be believable, and that the individual must have strategies for coping with such failure and assuming a new, manageable, lesser self.³

Goffman elaborates in *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, writing that the art of interpersonal interaction is about using verbal and non-verbal cues to maintain an impression, which may be totally disjoint from reality, with the goal of avoiding embarrassment. For Goffman, a social scene is made up of actors and an audience, and actors are chiefly concerned with *impression* management. Specifically, that is “the contingencies which arise in fostering an impression, and ... the techniques for meeting these contingencies.”⁴ An impression needs to meet social expectations and failing to meet those expectations may result in embarrassment. Saving performative face is not a tactic reserved for the performers. He notes, “[M]ost of these defensive techniques of impression management have a counterpart in the tactful tendency of the audience and outsiders to act in a protective way in order to help the performers save their own show.”⁵

³ Goffman, *The Goffman reader*, 5.

⁴ Ibid., *The presentation of self in everyday life* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1959), 49.

⁵ Ibid., *Presentation of self*, 146.

In his recent work which comes several decades after Goffman's, Ulrich Beck discusses the seemingly unrelated notion of risk management by institutional administrations:⁶

As the bipolar world fades away, we are moving from a world of enemies to one of dangers and risks. But what does 'risk' mean? Risk is the modern approach to foresee and control the future consequences of human action, the various unintended consequences of radicalized modernization. It is an (institutionalized) attempt, a cognitive map, to colonize the future. Every society has, of course, experienced dangers. But the risk regime is a function of a new order: it is not national, but global. It is rather intimately connected with an administrative and technical decision-making process. Risks presuppose decision. These decisions were previously undertaken with fixed norms of calculability, connecting means and ends or causes and effects. These norms are precisely what 'world risk society' has rendered invalid.

One major line of comparison which can be drawn between Beck's and Goffman's theoretical models is that the two conceive of interaction between bodies following a remarkably similar behavioral order, though at markedly different scales.

Goffman, like Beck, speaks of "calculation" as the means of determining action in an interactive space.⁷ They each describe the attempted rationalization of interactive space in order to maintain calm. Of course, Goffman generally seems to hold faith that people can accomplish this task, while Beck has noted the attempt to calculate risk has broken down and become ineffective. Beck's model takes into account key factors which ostensibly should not appear in the context of face-to-face interactions as described by Goffman: (1)

⁶ Beck, *World risk society*, 3-4.

⁷ Goffman, *Strategic interaction* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1969), 85.

modern societies scraping against the physical walls of the ecosystem containing them,⁸ and (2) in a more general sense, modern societies jettisoned by the notion of progress.⁹ It is sufficient to say that normal, physically-oriented, face-to-face social situations will not involve these dominating factors in a local sense.

For Goffman there are definitely exceptions, in which the interaction order breaks down. He is fascinated by these outlier situations, those which render feelings such as stigma (which I will discuss later), or embarrassment:¹⁰

When these disruptive events occur, the interaction itself may come to a confused and embarrassed halt. Some of the assumptions upon which the responses of the participants had been predicated become untenable, and the participants find themselves lodged in an interaction for which the situation has been wrongly defined and is now no longer defined. At such moments the individual whose presentation has been discredited may feel ashamed while the others present may feel hostile, and all the participants may come to feel ill at ease, nonplussed, out of countenance, embarrassed, experiencing the kind of anomie that is generated when the minute social system of face-to-face interaction breaks down.

While the fact these situations occur so infrequently for Goffman makes his theoretical observations distinct from Beck's, the question of *why* such deviances are not commonplace interests him. In "Goffman's Legacy to Political Sociology," William A. Gamson recalls an incident in 1968, when then-president of Columbia University, Grayson Kirk, encountered his wrecked office following a student occupation and asked, "My God,

⁸ Beck, *World risk society*, 19.

⁹ Ibid., 20.

¹⁰ Goffman, *Presentation of self*, 6.

how could human beings do a thing like this?"¹¹ Goffman responds in a footnote from his 1971 book *Relations in Public*, asking instead why human beings *do not* exhibit such behavior normally. He adds, "How come persons in authority have been so overwhelmingly successful in conning those beneath them into keeping the hell out of their offices?"¹²

On the following page, Goffman remarks that ordinary policing practices have broken down in effectiveness during the past decade, and that, although the guaranteed mortification of public arrest was previously thought to keep people in line, order was also kept by "actual respect and informal segregation by class, race and age," categories he does not think play as strong a role any longer.¹³ Beck makes a similar comment: "by virtue of its inherent dynamism, modern society is undercutting its formations of class, stratum, occupation, sex roles, nuclear family, plant, business sectors and of course also the prerequisites and continuing forms of natural techno-economic progress."¹⁴

Goffman's theory of dramaturgical interaction can be understood as a perhaps imperfect, but close description of how nation-states seek to interact, and successfully interacted, prior to the hit of the second modernity. States were able to maintain façades, and "save face," in front of the audiences of foreign states and of their own citizens. Reflexive modernity has made it impossible for institutions to properly plan for inevitable public backlash.¹⁵

¹¹ William A. Gamson, "Goffman's Legacy to Political Sociology", *Theory and Society*, 14 (5) (1985): 606.

¹² Goffman, *Relations in public; microstudies of the public order* (New York: Basic Books, 1971), 288.

¹³ *Ibid.*, *Relations in public*, 289.

¹⁴ Beck, Anthony Giddens, and Scott Lash, *Reflexive modernization: politics, tradition and aesthetics in the modern social order* (Stanford, Calif: Stanford University Press, 1994), 2.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 29.

ON NATURE, AND REFLEXIVE CONSTRUCTION OF SOCIAL REALITY

In the words of Charles Lemert, Goffman “understood, at some basic level, that social relations were already by then organized more around the appearance than the content of things.” Fundamental to Goffman’s understanding of social interaction is the assumption that social roles and performances have little to do with what is in fact “true” or “natural.” Beck, however, is noted for the inclusion of the physical world in his sociological formulations. According to Johannes Willms, Beck’s work is a revelation, which “provided for sociology a way of speaking of the physical world and its risks that brought in a striking array of new topics.”¹⁶ But what is also important to his work is that, despite risks having “profound physical consequences,”¹⁷ they are social questions regarding human-manufactured uncertainties. In *World Risk Society*, Beck proposes a “conceptual framework which allows us to grasp [ecological questions] as problems not of the *environment* or surrounding world, but of the *inner* world of society,” since physical consequences are merely sandwiched between social cause and effect.¹⁸ Further, Beck is suspect of formulations of “nature”:¹⁹

It is already becoming recognizable that nature, the great constant of the industrial epoch, is losing its pre-ordained character, it is becoming a product, the integral, shapable ‘inner nature’ of ... post-industrial society. The abstraction of nature leads into industrial society. The integration of nature into society leads beyond industrial society. ‘Nature’ becomes a

¹⁶ Beck and Johannes Willms, *Conversations with Ulrich Beck* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press in association with Blackwell, 2004), 4.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 3.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, *World risk society*, 19.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, *Reflexive modernization*, 27.

social project, a utopia that is to be reconstructed, shaped and transformed. *Renaturalization* means *denaturalization*.

Something of a departure from Goffman's usual nature-devoid talk is his discussion in *Stigma*, which often references physical, mostly unavoidable "natural" conditions bringing social stigma. Goffman is sure to highlight that stigma is often associated with physical attributes, but the physical attribute itself is not what stigmatizes, so much as is a relationship:²⁰

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 ... an individual who desires to fight for his country may conceal a physical defect, lest his claimed physical status be discredited; later, the same individual, embittered and trying to get out of the army, may succeed in gaining admission to the army hospital, where he would be discredited if discovered in not really having an acute sickness.

What this case and Beck's analysis have in common is that socially ingrained risks result from "natural" threats which have no necessarily inherent social effect, though conditions can make associated social risk more or less unavoidable.

Goffman divides stigmatized individuals into a duality between those who can assume their differentness is already known, or the *discredited*, and those who have the potential to hide that difference, or the *discreditable*. In the latter case, a social situation can carry potential for aversion that is unknown to one or more participants. Says Goffman,

²⁰ Goffman, *Stigma; notes on the management of spoiled identity* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1963), 4-5.

“The issue is not that of managing tension generated during social contacts, but rather that of managing information about his failing.” Goffman calls this “passing.”²¹

Is there a parallel here, between Goffman’s conception of stigma and Beck’s delineation between threats that go detected by monitoring institutions, and threats that do not? Each model involves unpredictable threats, yet the comparison may be a stretch. Whereas for Goffman’s analysis of stigma, threats are often genetic, and in any case alien in origin to the closed system of the social space, threats in Beck’s risk society are produced *by* the society.

THE CONSTRUCTION OF SELF AND INDIVIDUALIZATION

The construction of self is a topic that both Goffman and Beck have clear, divergent ideas about. Goffman, as mentioned already, sees self as a temporal performance designed to fulfill structural expectations within a social setting. Beck, on the other hand, sees the individual as the most important and foundational part of new social structure in the age of reflexive modernization; “the individual becomes, for the first time in history, the basic unit of social reproduction.”²² Regardless of whether these two ideas can coexist, fashioned as expressions of different epochs, it is useful to weigh their contrasts.

Beck argues that in the age of the new individual, structural roles are abolished, and rights are assigned to person rather than class.²³ He grants a remarkable amount of agency to the (2nd) modern individual. Addressing thinkers like Goffman, he says that action by

²¹ Goffman, *Stigma*, 47-48.

²² Beck, *Conversations*, 63.

²³ *Ibid.*, 64.

individuals “can no longer be treated as the resultant of group pressures,”²⁴ and that individualization “cannot be equated with the mere management of self-image.”²⁵

Beck asserts “life construction is now a key part of social construction, of social structuration.”²⁶ He elaborates:²⁷

When individualism becomes disembedded *and* institutionalized, it becomes a kind of “supersubstructure.” It’s an inherently paradoxical social structure. In order to analyze it, sociology will have to change its approach from the logic of self-reproducing structures to the logic of “flows” and “networks.”

A striking example Beck uses of the changing, individualized social structure, that also demonstrates the competing appeasements of risk society at a low level, is the family unit. Today’s individuals living in families are compelled not just to perform the role of the family member, but also to pursue individual goals and successes which may conflict with the former objective. Beck says, “When it comes to crisis, we want the other person to give in so that we can follow our own dream a little farther.”²⁸

Such a model of family life certainly diverges from the Goffmanian idea, which would stop at family members seeking to perform their familial roles correctly. But why? Goffman typically did not conceive of converging social spheres exerting demands on individuals simultaneously, yet it could be argued that he did not need to during the 1950s. To be case-specific, the problem of a woman needing to pursue a career at possible risk to

²⁴ Beck, *Conversations*, 65.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 68.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 65

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 70-71

her home stability did not plague American families at the time. The household contradictions we encounter today are inextricably linked, if we believe Beck, to late modern progress.²⁹

ON SOCIAL CHANGE

From Beck's ideas surrounding individualization are derived his ideas on social change. He sees society being shaped in the late modern era by "sub-politics," or "shaping society *from below*."³⁰

In the wake of sub-politicization, there are growing opportunities to have a voice and a share in the arrangement of society for groups hitherto uninvolved in the substantive technification and industrialization process: citizens, the public sphere, social movements, expert groups, working people on site; there are even opportunities for courageous individuals to 'move mountains' in the nerve centres of development. Politicization thus implies a decrease of the central rule approach; it means that processes which had heretofore always run friction-free fizzle out in the resistance of contradictory objectives.

For sure, Beck's idea that the rogue individual can "move mountains" may sound immensely privileged, or delusional, to anyone who has experienced structural resistance firsthand (or, to Goffman). Still, his opening passage in "The Reinvention of Politics" underlines a compelling case for how this new, upside-down system of power can be grasped to accomplish incalculable, unforeseen changes: the collapse of the U.S.S.R. in 1989.³¹ How else could a monstrous political being be taken down by the work of human rights NGOs?

²⁹ Beck, *Conversations*, 71.

³⁰ Beck, *Reflexive modernization*, 23.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 1.

For most of his own work, Goffman seems uninterested in tracking wide-scale social change, and sees the individual responding to whatever contours the social situation conjures (or else!). In 1982, the year he died, Goffman gave a lecture before the American Sociological Association ("The Interaction Order") in which he actually outlines specific ways in which situational nuance can redefine structure. The first is the way that a member of a social structure can bear consequences upon that structure based upon incidents in separate life spheres, in the form of injury, death, or other affectation. The second is the way in which important structural players can be influenced face-to-face by the interaction order. Third is the way in which the impression made in some specific personal encounters effects the individual's life chances substantially.³²

The second manner of change highlighted by Goffman is especially important insofar as it appears to be an alternative wording of Beck's sub-politics. This application of the interaction order, with acknowledgement of the way a performance's audience can hold the key to extra-situational, macro-level change, fits nicely with Beck's idea of social change in the era of reflexive modernization—perhaps, thanks to Goffman's old age, and witness of late modernity, upon delivering the lecture.

CONCLUSION

Though Goffman's and Beck's theories are intended for studying the social world at different scales, their congruities suggest a deeper level of connective study should be done. Specifically, I wonder if scholars might seek to understand the late modern attempt to calculate risk, in terms of the failed interaction order. Such an investigation would carry

³² Goffman, "The Interaction Order: American Sociological Association, 1982 Presidential Address", *American Sociological Review*. 48 (1) (1983): 8.

implications for what lies beyond the normally fail-proof social dramas of modern Goffmanian study.

While Goffman and Beck remain different in many respects, their similarities offer a glimpse at what a more comprehensive, multi-scopie theory of the late modern social world can look like.

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