

Scheff, Thomas J. Jr.

Goffman Unbound! A New Paradigm for Social Science.

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In *Goffman Unbound: A New Paradigm for Social Science* Thomas Scheff elaborates a reading of Goffman's work that pushes to the forefront the significance of emotions, and further develops his own analyses of the importance of emotions for understanding social existence. Scheff, a student of Goffman's, has developed a significant body of work on the sociology of emotions, exploring topics such as shame, violence, mental illness, and masculinity. Here he develops his sociology of emotions further, particularly emphasizing the significance of shame for social bonds.

Scheff formulates the importance of the "emotional-relational world" for actors at the micro-level, but develops ways of thinking about the emotional basis of larger institutions and collective actions, dealing with such topics as, love, hate, nationalism, masculinity and war. With respect to aggressive forms of nationalism and war for example, he makes interesting connections with forms of "hypermasculinity," which involve the masculinist repression of shame, and also discusses the ways in which shame is experienced and manipulated at the collective level. In formulating these issues, Scheff elaborates and critiques themes from the seminal essay "Where the Action Is," in which Goffman introduces the idea of the "cult of masculinity" (Goffman 1967).

One of Scheff's methodological stipulations is that an author's life is valuable for understanding the work. Early in the book, the discussions of Goffman's life foreground Scheff's own emphasis on the emotions; Scheff's personal relationship to Goffman is an example of the emotional-relational world that Scheff wants to emphasize and rehabilitate for social scientific analysis. Scheff reflects on characterizations of Goffman as an odd character, but more importantly is interested in understanding Goffman's penchant for "hazing" practices inflicted upon graduate students and colleagues. These practices are taken to be representative of Goffman's own "hypermasculinity," a demonstration of the "character contests" Goffman himself analyzed in "Where the Action Is." As with the concept of hypermasculinity, the idea of "character contests" is applied to an analysis of collective forms of aggression.

Scheff develops his analysis of the emotional-relational world by showing how the Goffmanian understanding of self-other relations draws upon and extends Cooley's notion of the "looking-glass self." Goffman went further than Cooley by emphasizing emotion management. But for Goffman the focus was primarily on embarrassment, and Scheff explores a number of other emotions and their management: love, hate, shame, anger, grief. The focus on emotions and intersubjectivity lays the ground for Scheff to develop his analysis of the emotional basis of collective processes, notably conflicts

In certain respects, Scheff's book reads like a treatise on shame, with the theme of shame as the "master emotion," running throughout the book. Scheff traces the place of shame in the works of Freud and Elias, and in contemporary psychoanalysis and social psychology. He follows up on Elias's insights into the notion of lower shame thresholds in modern societies, and reflects on the low visibility of the shame concept. This is due to a "taboo on shame" in the emotional life of the culture, which also finds its way into social scientific research. Scheff critiques the views of those, such as Freud and Benedict, who emphasize guilt as the primary emotion in urban industrial societies.

As Scheff's interest in emotions permits him the methodological valuing of intuition, I have to remark that the emphasis on shame did not resonate strongly with me, and this is perhaps due to my own feeling that we are living under conditions of rampant shamelessness. I wonder then about the centrality of shame in contemporary late modern societies. Such doubts would challenge Scheff's centrality for shame. The taboo on shame, the silence about shame in western cultures, might actually signify its weakening hold on conduct.

In any case, issues of social organization need to be raised. If, following Elias, the emotions can be viewed in terms of their socio-historical shaping, we might ask after the status of shame in societies where face-to-face interaction is complemented, perhaps even overshadowed by forms of mediated parasocial interaction, including internet communication, and in environments where media images insinuate themselves into interactions and self-conceptions. The mediated "enabling" of shamelessness must be broached, when co-presence is denied its physical and ethical power. The media provide many examples: banal reality TV programs, pervasive sexuality and violence, the mainstreaming of internet pornography, the bad behaviour of celebrities, mindless performances found on YouTube and other internet video sites.

On the topic of emotions in late modern societies, Scheff's call for a new paradigm centered on emotions finds interesting theoretic echoes with Mestrovic's formulation and critiques of "post-emotionalism" (Mestrovic 1997); also, the focus on the emotional-relational world and discussions of hatred, alienation, shame-violence links and collective conflicts parallel Axel Honneth's work on the intersubjective basis of social conflicts, grounded in struggles for recognition (Honneth 1996).

As Scheff points, out, the scholarly commentary on Goffman's *oeuvre* has been characterized by much praise, much criticism, and much misunderstanding. While the notion of "a new paradigm for social science" is a provocative claim, Scheff does succeed in demonstrating how Goffman's *oeuvre* continues to be a rich resource for sociological work.

Goffman Unbound provides an original formulation of Goffman's work, emphasizing the emotional-relational grounds of intersubjectivity—in a world where deadly conflicts and violence are daily occurrences for many, and insecurity of social bonds a reality for many others, Scheff's formulations have much to offer our understanding of the emotional basis and uncertainties of contemporary social existence.

References

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