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Goffman back in town. New relations in public

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The Social Order of Urbanity

Today, Erving Goffman's work remains pivotal for all scholars interested in the study of public order and publicness more generally.[1] Both the analytical categories Goffman introduced, and the fine-grained sensitivity towards capturing the apparently most ephemeral facets of social interaction, constitute two of the long-lasting aspects of his theoretical legacy. Clearly, however, the urban phenomena addressed by Goffman have empirically changed in substantial ways: the reconfigurations of urbanity over the last 50 years are deep and wide-ranging.

Phenomena such as urban sprawl and suburban living, the infusion of new media technologies in urban space – ranging from smartphones to surveillance, from digital service platforms to self-driving vehicles – the rise of network formations at multiple scales in urban governance, and the advent of postcolonial and non-Western approaches – drawing attention on issues such as the plurality of urban cultures, informal urbanism, and entrenched power asymmetries in spatial uses – all have deeply transformed on the ground what we mean by public space. Historical accidents, we have learnt, also powerfully impact upon the configurations of urbanity, as for instance in the case of the bodily and spatial transformations associated with the Covid-19 pandemic, which has reintroduced a number of long forgotten debates: indeed, around 1918-20, on the occasion of the Spanish flu pandemic, many similar issues concerning the regulation of access to public space, interpersonal distances etc. had already been on the table (Tomes 2010).

From a theoretical point of view, Goffman's sociology can be characterised as a wide-ranging conceptual mapping of a virtual space of possible interaction events, along with the provision that interaction itself works as the testing ground for those possibilities. Each time, interaction tests *ex vivo* the carrying capacity of a territory, the viability of a rule, the effectiveness of a claim, the orderliness of an arrangement. Similar testing moments are often tensional, taxing moments for the parties involved – all of which makes them all the more relevant to the social scientist. Provided that it is fair to classify Goffman's approach to social life as an 'immanentist' one – namely, one that does not presuppose the existence of social structures or systems, but observes how social order emerges from below through all the troubled vagaries and the 'unwarranted initiatings'[2] of the moment – then we should also recognise that interaction itself *generates* a number of experimental situations, where new types of order, new relations of inter-visibility, and new interpretive categories of social action may, at each moment, emerge.

In this article, we revisit Goffman's social theory, scouting for such moments of emergence in the contemporary world. We specifically approach Goffman through the lens of urban life: his is a theory, we believe, that is thoroughly and consistently *urban* in its foundations, and could not be appreciated without keeping in mind the tenets of the classical model of urban civility, having to do with the preservation of social peace and the management of occasional interpersonal conflicts within a space of enhanced visibility and public accountability.[3] Notions of respect and respectability – as well as, conversely, of blame and shame – are so essential to these processes that they could be regarded as the veritable 'currency' in which all civil relations are traded.

Our central concern here rests with drawing some consequences from the fact that the contemporary conditions of urbanity exceed those taken into account by the classical model. Suburbanism, for instance, offers repertoires of interaction that cannot be squarely subsumed under classical civility. In this vein, for instance, recent research by Alan Walks (2013) updates Louis Wirth's (1938) theory of urbanism, pinning down the specificities of

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[2] 'We must always pause at least for a moment in our oncoming rejection of another in order to check the importuner out. There is no choice: social life must ever expose itself to unwarranted initiatings' (Goffman 1971: 374).

[3] One central Goffman's claim that supports our interpretation of his work is that, in the life of social animals, 'social life and public life are coterminous' (1971: xvii). For a classic reconstruction of the civility model of urbanity, see Sennett (2017[1977]).

suburbanism as a related, and yet distinct, way of life – precisely, as Walks (2013: 1472) puts it, suburbanism can be regarded as 'urbanism's internal ever-present anti-thesis.' Once understood as a 'multidimensional evolving process within urbanism that is constantly fluctuating and pulsating as the flows producing its relational forms shift and overlap in space' (ibid.), suburbanism lays emphasis on avoidance, isolation and privatism at the expense of meetingness, connectivity, and concentration.

Similarly, Margarethe Kusenbach's (2006) ethnographic research on the 'patterns of neighbouring' investigates the specific expectations and the interactional requirements emerging from neighbourly relations. In community and 'parochial' places, forms of interaction can be observed that are noticeably different from those of general urban civility. These include for instance friendly recognition, parochial helpfulness, proactive intervention and an active – either positive or negative – stance towards diversity: friendly recognition (saying 'hi' to familiar neighbours) inherently entails breaking with the rule of civil inattention; parochial helpfulness contradicts the orientation towards restrain typical of public settings; intervention entails watching out and caring for neighbours and their belongings, which is not the dominant pattern in quintessential public places; and finally, neighbouring allows for more expressive personal and judgmental stances that dispense with the neutrality of civility – pushing either towards the positive pole of appreciation and celebration, or towards the negative pole of hostility and reporting to the police.

Of course, that does not mean that classic civility is simply superseded and that crucial interaction formats such as civil inattention have disappeared. On the contrary, scholars such as the ones just mentioned have been amply inspired by Goffman's own analytics, whose situational focus keeps as one of its core concerns the dynamic and self-corrective nature of public interaction. Amongst the most interesting images mobilised by Goffman is, in this sense, the metaphor of the court: public life, he argues, is made of 'settings for racing through versions in miniature of the entire judicial process' (Goffman 1971: 107-8). Here, we find a particular immanentist version of law that is remarkably different from both official law and the mainstream theories of law in the legal-positivist tradition – yet one that, at the same time, resonates with a radical-legal-pluralist perspective (Macdonald 2002). As the anthropology of legal pluralism, too, has documented, law is inseparable from its ritualistic performance and the joint production of symbols, or shared images: indeed, in Goffman's theory, social life is revealed to be held together by a close-knit, on-going process of repetition, adaptation, habituation and self-correction, whereby order emerges out of contingent encounters to be processed *in live stream*.

The whole sequence of infraction, trial, penalty and reparation occurs via rituals that must be attended and carried out *all in the same circumstance* – in a way that, so to speak, sticks to the three ancient Aristotelian units of space, place and action. So writes Goffman:

> In the realm of public order it is not obedience or disobedience that are central but occasions that give rise to remedial work of various kinds … This arrangement introduces flexibility; did it not exist, public life would become hopelessly clogged with the commission of minor territorial offenses and their adjudication.

It is important to notice here how Goffman's use of the legal metaphor was provocative at the time when it was formulated, associating two orders of reality usually kept apart. In other words, the phenomenological domain of social emergence analysed by Goffman has, for a long time, been only indirectly affected by institutional logics of ordering – such as those of law, governance, security or planning. Whilst the logic of public life has projected onto urban space stable channels of movements and recognisable constraints, for long the contingent unfolding of face-to-face encounters has largely escaped the institutional radar, its ordering dependent mostly on informal and largely invisible processes of contingent emergence, modulated by a variety of socio-cultural motifs as well as individual-strategic moves.

In the next few pages, we delve into the transformations of such immanent ordering of everyday harmonisation and adjustment of social control in public life: whereas Goffman used law as a metaphor for understanding the process of self-regulation of the ephemeral encounters scattered through public space, what we are seeing today is an *actual multiplication* of spaces of law within the urban domain. This way, the urban turns into a veritable *lawscape* (Philippopoulos-Mihalopoulos 2015); concurrently, by this very process, the law is intrinsically transformed into something different from what classic legal theory held. We suggest that the new technologies infused into urban spaces and their architectural-atmospheric power call for attentive scrutiny precisely at this juncture: with the surfacing and convergence of expert knowledge, techniques and technologies in the fields of governance, security, marketing and leisure, the aesthetic qualities of urban space and the ways in which personal and interpersonal attentions are distributed within it have increasingly become a direct concern for a host of institutions, both public and private, and their regulatory logic.

From a long-term historical perspective, the German philosopher Peter Sloterdijk (2013; 2016) has diagnosed a process of gradual 'explication of the atmosphere' unfolding since the end of 19th century: beginning, as Sloterdijk reconstructs, from the cultural shock of

World-War-I toxic gas warfare, the air we breathe, its pressure and composition, have become central life concerns. The trend towards making the atmosphere increasingly 'explicit' and visible in social life has been amplified in the urban domain over the last half a century, not only in extreme life and death situations, but in a much more diffused way across daily spaces of interactions. A whole 'aesthetic of immersion' has enhanced our awareness of the materiality, fragility, and strategic centrality of those spaces, which, in turn, has entailed an increasingly direct and explicit interest for the aesthetic-sensory aspects of public life. One may for instance think about the increased role played by cultural heritage and the arts in the context of urban planning and place branding, or the growing socio-economical significance of event management in contemporary urban politics, from local festivals to global mega events (Pavoni 2018). Whilst Goffman regarded public interaction as largely demanded to the play of informal adjustments and adaptations inherent in the unfolding of interaction itself, we invite scholars to consider the extent to which designed aesthetic-sensory atmospheres affect public interaction. It is not only a matter of inserting a Foucauldian microphysics of power into Goffman's microsociology, but above all of understanding how the structuring of atmospheres has become a central concern of urban politics. Law, urban security, planning, aesthetics and branding form a new force-field within which interaction gets moulded.

In this context, we notice that a vast array of technologies of visibility has increasingly exerted its influence on the formats of urban civility. Not only do such technologies entail an expansion of publicness beyond traditional public places – as in online interaction spaces – but they also perform a veritable infusion of software, platforms and data into everyday urban life, through the scattering of smart objects in space and the parallel spreading of smart devices carried around by urbanites (Kitchin and Dodge 2011) as well as the sheer panoply of digital data being produced by the urban dynamics (Batty 2013). A couple of quick examples at this point suffice to make our point. First, we may consider how contemporary surveillance enhances the asymmetries of visibility by 'simply' amplifying the consciousness of being always traceable and identifiable across physical as well as digital spaces. The outcomes of such a process are neither linear nor easily predictable: if we just consider phenomena like online brawls and social media flares (Lane 2016) we notice how surveillance per se does not seem to induce more moderation in people's behaviour (as wishfully assumed by Bentham). Second, we may evoke how digital service platforms change service interactions themselves. Consider even the trivial act of ordering food online from a provider: the potential for improvisation, variation and display of civility that

characterised even similarly thin-layered interactions, is now largely superseded by algorithmic delegation. We return to this second example more extensively below.

In general, the trend we are observing is driven by what, elsewhere, we have proposed to call *atmoculture* (Pavoni and Brighenti 2017). Atmoculture foregrounds the increasing centrality of the emotional, sensorial and affective dimensions of public interaction in contemporary urban politics – including marketing, technology, law and criminology. In the field of marketing, this turn has typically been accompanied by the rise of so-called attention economy, experience economy and place branding (Kärrholm 2016) – all strategies for extracting economic value from the fine-grained dialectics of attention and inattention first dissected by Goffman. In the field of technology, the trend can be seen in the application of system theory and cybernetics to urban planning, ranging from city imageability *à la* Kevin Lynch (1960) to contemporary platform urbanism, urban computing, and smart cities (e.g. Marvin et al. 2015; Beverungen et al. 2017; Sadowski 2020; Mattern 2021). Finally, in the field of law, criminology and security studies, situational and environmental theories of crime prevention have emerged since soon after Goffman's work, which have led to patterns of law enforcement and policing increasingly attuned to a so-called 'criminology of everyday life' (Garland 2001), including notorious approaches such as 'quality-of-life' policing and the 'broken windows theory' of crime, popularised by George L. Kelling and James Q. Wilson (1982).[4] Jointly considered, all these trends have signalled an ever-widening institutional intervention into everyday life that has simultaneously expanded and surpassed the traditional domain of law and legal regulation.

'Normal Appearances' in The New Politics of Ease

The new patterns of urban life introduced by atmoculture can be better appreciated with reference to the condition Goffman famously dubbed 'normal appearances:'

> Individuals, whether in human or animal form, exhibit two basic modes of activity. They go about their business grazing, gazing, mothering, digesting, building, resting, playing, placidly attending to easily managed matters at hand. Or, fully mobilized, a fury of intent, alarmed, they get ready to attack or to stalk or to flee. (Goffman 1971: 238)

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[4] Kelling and Wilson were, in fact, following closely the footprints set out more than a decade earlier by Wilson's teacher, Edward Banfield (1970), the famous political scientist who was also a near contemporary of Goffman's.

What needs to be ascertained then is how the production of normalcy is affected when various interactional requirements are 'outsourced' to technological and legal infrastructures, rather than performed interactively by the people. In this vein, for instance, Rogers Brubaker (2020: 772) has recently remarked that 'Digital hyperconnectivity has recast social relationships, lifting them out of the here and now, disciplining and re-formatting them, and infusing them with new obligations, new expectations, and new anxieties.' Certainly, all social institutions can be said to be based on some form of cognitive or axiological delegation – just as urban life can never be fully disentangled from a process of 'habituation' to an environment that appears as *prima facie* new, counter-intuitive and artificial (Simmel 1903). To this effect, Goffman noted that the institutionalisation of social control usually has the purpose of obviating 'the need for certain forms of care and attentiveness.'[5] He inferred that:

> normal appearances mean that it is safe and sound to continue on with the activity at hand with only peripheral attention given to checking up on the stability of the environment. (Goffman 1971: 239)

Such 'sensing' of normalcy is fundamental in coalescing the social processes of habituation and ordering, with the corollary that 'when a subject senses that things are normal, he is likely to exude signs of calmness and ease' (1971: 270). It is precisely in this respect that an important historical transformation seems to have occurred: the technological and legal transformations of the last few decades have turned the production of such states of ease (or absence of fear or stress) into a precise, direct objective of urban policies. Concurrently, a sort of 'right to be free from fear' (Ramsay 2008) has been institutionalised via a host of *ad hoc* regulations, including for instance anti-social behaviour and quality-of-life legislation, with their accompanying 'soft policies of exclusion' (Thörn 2011) as well as other 'commonly reductive mode[s] of thinking' (Mattern 2021: 24). What above we have referred to as atmoculture, in other words, gives rise to a comfort-oriented society in which the conditions of tranquillity, ease, and peace of mind are increasingly championed as *the* normative structure of public life (Brighenti and Pavoni 2019).

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[5] 'Controls are institutionalized: fixed alarms tell the individual what bottle has poison, what road is slippery, what slopes are for experts, what parts of the roof are not fenced in, what stairs are unsafe. More important, safety codes are embodied variously in building practices, factory equipment, means of transportation, and consumer goods, all obviating the need for certain forms of care and attentiveness.' (Goffman 1971: 250)

The atmocultural logic is increasingly infiltrating the microenvironments of public life analysed by Goffman. This occurs through, on the one hand, the widening of formal regulations, along with an extension of the domain of legal 'sensitivity,' and, on the other, the massive reliance upon digital technologies enabling new modes and degrees of surveillance, both in public spaces – with CCTVs and sentient-city apparatuses – and in digital spaces – with tracing and location tracking activities performed by apps and smart phones. A global reconfiguration in the balance between the Goffmanian states of 'ease' and 'alarm' ensues, whereby both the capacity to react in the face of the unexpected and the responsibility to intervene on behalf of incapacitated others are challenged.

As an increasing number of legal regulations and digital infrastructures and devices comes to be embedded into the very texture of contemporary urban life, important changes in the situational strategies explored by Goffman can also be delineated. For instance, two classic Goffmanian interaction formats detectable in public life include *scanning* and *externalisation*. Goffman drew the notion of *scanning* in particular from scholarship in ethology and psychology: since the 1930s and through the 1950s, phenomena involving personal space and interpersonal distancing in animals and humans had been abundantly documented (Hall 1966). Goffman called scanning a visual technique that enables the subject to rapidly acquire needed information about the others who are co-present in the same situation; conversely, he called externalisation the ways in which the subject makes its own intentions *visible*, intelligible and known to co-present others. Externalisation, in other words, works as an unspoken form of *notification* that comes in conjunction with scanning, forming a unique compound of public seeing and being seen, especially pitched to the real-time rhythm of interaction.

The new media affect both processes. On the one hand, these devices must certainly be regarded as objects among others, fully inserted into the contingencies of situations. From this perspective, they offer new abundant opportunities for 'self-involvement:' people sink into their phone to avoid being disturbed, abstracting themselves from the surrounding urban scene. This also suggests that courtesy rituals have not disappeared, even though their style has changed and they may no longer look quite 'Victorian.' More proactive users' acts, such as recording the environment through pictures and audio with one's smartphone, are now much more tolerated than when the same activities had to be carried out with the use of cumbersome and visually more impacting devices (cameras, video cameras, audio recorders etc.). On the other hand, however, the new media are not simply *inserted in* situations, they also actively *shape* those situations in multiple terms. For instance, the way in which online delivery platforms function renders some externalisation

work irrelevant, given that the service relation is already well defined, even concluded, at the point when service is actually delivered. Or, to consider another everyday experience, online Zoom meetings – understood precisely as a new case of urban interaction – are formats with situation-shaping capacity. Although many rituals of physical gatherings are preserved on Zoom meetings, there are also clear differences in the way technological power enables the meeting's convenor, for instance, to forcefully make people shut up by just 'muting' them, in a way that largely transcends all ritual requirements for turn-taking.

Just as the urban rhythms of scanning and externalisation are being reshaped, so are the notions of situational 'proprieties' and 'improprieties.' Notably, in this case, surreptitious forms of criminalisation are generated, which are often indirect, proceeding as they do through purportedly neutral administrative measures. These include, for instance, zoning orders, the non-compliance of which may lead to criminal sanctions. Depending on the location, race, culture, sexual orientation, and other politically charged variables, the behaviour of some individuals comes to be hyper-responsibilised, while the task of reacting and adjusting *vis-à-vis* the unfolding of unexpected encounters is delegated to a host of technological-juridical infrastructures. Accordingly, responsibility is increasingly reduced to the task of carving out spaces of exemption from the very need to be responsible: a condition of horizontal separation via vertical delegation, which systematically seeks to immunise urbanites against the ethical necessity to perform 'responsible gestures' in reaction to unexpected occurrences. In the first wave of the Covid19 pandemic, this social geometry has been epitomised by the omnipresent plead to *Stay Home*, in a way that recalled those signs often found in public transport, where passengers are invited to scan the environment in search for possible threats, just in order to 'do nothing and call the police' if 'anything suspicious' is observed.[6]

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[6] While the injunction to 'Stay Home' has been a rather reasonable measure in the early days of the pandemic, it has remained until now an unquestionable rhetorical strategy in case of emergency, against a growing scientific evidence suggesting that staying home, besides causing a worrying increase in psycho-physical diseases and domestic violence, could actually be *more* conducive to contagion than being outside, in the open. Instead, on the implicit presupposition that outdoors responsible behaviour could not be trusted, many public spaces such as urban parks have remained under strict control in lockdown situations, with outdoors activity and socialisation hindered, or altogether forbidden (e.g. Tulumello 2021). Likewise, the 'Stay Home' rhetoric has deafened the rare calls to help those in need, with solidarity measures mainly left to grassroots initiatives. For the most part, in other words, the suggestion has been to *do nothing*, while inhabiting a technological cocoon

This is how the logic of comfort works – physically, legally, and aesthetically – to *tune in* spaces of consensual de-responsibility (Pavoni and Brighenti, 2017). Urban space is increasingly engineered so that it can *exude* signs of reassurance, as orchestrated by a precise economy of comfort, which Goffman himself called 'reassuring information.' Atmosphere also excel at mood manipulation, or at least conduciveness (see Brubaker 2020: 791). Rather than proceeding interactionally, it is now the technological, legal and securitarian production of ease that becomes key. Aesthetically and technologically, then, the sense of ease is underpinned by all the regulations through which security and branding overlap within the province of a new 'general economy' (Thrift, 2011). In short, as hinted above, it is the very design of situations – which Goffman described as unfolding in contingent and ephemeral ways – that has increasingly become an explicit target of urban politics.

In this new context, we notice how notions of intentionality, causation and responsibility – representing some of the tenets of the classic civility model – take on new significations. Goffman remarked the inferential work made by individuals in public as they assess the 'normalcy' of others:

> When an individual finds persons in his presence acting improperly or appearing out of place, he can read this as evidence that although the peculiarity itself may not be a threat to him, still, those who are peculiar in one regard may well be peculiar in other ways, too, some of which may be threatening. For the individual, then, impropriety on the part of others may function as an alarming sign. (Goffman 1971: 241)

Once a series of instances of impropriety are in-built within the legal system and recognised automatically by technological means, all the inferential nuances of everyday urban syllogism – including expectations of custom, habit, negotiation and mutuality – are *ipso facto* made irrelevant. In other words, situational propriety and impropriety are reworked at the legal level, too, so that even unintentional cues – an abandoned bag, a hooded boy, a tag on the wall… – get recorded and 'indexed' as meaningful environmental elements, and come to dye the whole urban atmosphere with negative valences, orienting and predisposing bodies in ways which can only partially be grasped by pure interaction analysis.[7] A basic paradox is thus ignited by the creation of a feedback loop between

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of domestic comfort – whose degree of comfort is greatly dependent on the socio-economical condition – that screened the individuals from the need to be *socially* responsible.

[7] The notion of 'valence' comes form Kurt Lewin's (1963) 'hodological' psychology. Similar dynamics of hyper-semiotisation, leading to a paradigm of suspicion, were described by Frantz Fanon (1961)

measurable 'justiciability' and the further delegation of situational action and reaction. New interaction patterns derive from the unprecedented role taken on by urban atmospheres: the 'dual tone' of subsequently alternating states evoked by Goffman (*being at ease* and *being alarmed*), has now become an 'objective' – insofar as calculable – quality of the environment, rather than a 'mere' stance of the involved individual actors. Consequently, public life in contemporary data-driven and security-obsessed societies tends to be electrified in novel ways, in conjunction with an amplified series of potentially alarming cues.

For instance, the need to body-gloss one's behaviour results amplified for all those categories of people who are conscious of their being placed in special risk categories. Here, one can think of Arab minorities in the context of cities under the 'terrorist threat,' or of immigrant populations who must prove more than others their impeccable compliance with 'health emergency' measures. As one remembers, Goffman (1971: 129) described a 'body gloss' as 'a means by which the individual can try to free himself from what otherwise would be the undesirable characterological implications of what it is he finds himself doing'. The main function of a body gloss is to prevent possible misunderstandings, or even possible *understatements* conveyed by one's posture: body glosses are tools of social harmonisation to be staged via orientation, circumspection or overplay. The case of 'circumspection glosses' is particularly telling:

> When an individual finds that his action may be construed as an encroachment or threat of some kind, he often provides gestural evidence that his intentions are honourable – illustrated in the use of scanning to cover staring… (Goffman 1971: 131)

In face of a normatively and technologically controlled atmosphere, evading body-glossing becomes increasingly difficult; at the same time, increasingly precise and specific classifications of behaviour and gestures – as well as of faces and other biometric and emotional signs – limit the expressive nuances of body-glossing itself. For instance, once an orientation becomes dominant – as in the case of the preference for 'reporting' and/or informing the authorities ('If you see, you report') – the social mechanisms of 'remediation' detailed by Goffman – through which the socius holds itself together thanks to a constant

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as being at play in colonial contexts, where the colonised was cast as, by definition, *out of place*. What is different in the contemporary context, is the quantitative calculation of the indexes of disorder and the cues of environmental quality. A clear illustration of this approach in urban studies is, for instance, Robert J. Sampson's (2009) studies on 'urban disorder.'

process of adjustment – are gradually eroded, outsourced as they are to legal stipulations and digital-technological frameworks. In this vein, Abdoumaliq Simone (2016) has remarked that these trends lead to a gradual depletion of the capacity of 'figuring out', which is fundamental to urban life. Similarly, Bernard Stiegler (2019) has reflected on the dwindling of *savoir-faire*[8] that results from an increasingly addictive reliance on digital technologies. To briefly consider some other examples, contemporary platform urbanism in theory allows to bypass any face-to-face interaction, going about in the city, finding one's way, buying stuff, travelling and shopping: one only needs to interact with the urban environment through the filter, or sieve, of a smart phone. Since machine-learning algorithms, encoded into new media apps, are tasked with mediating in real time the contingencies of urban life – all to the 'benefit' of the user – it turns out that the 'ultra-convenience' of new technologies (Tovey 2020) easily becomes addictive.

All of this stymies the development of an urban skill of 'coping,' which Goffman himself regarded as pivotal for public life.[9] In other words, the aestheticisation and commodification of the urban leads to a soothing or narcotising of urban life, which increasingly 'revolves around never feeling less than fully at ease' (Williams 2013). Along this way, all hampering feelings – such as mistrust, fear, boredom, but also openness, capacity to deal with the unpredictable, and a certain stoical patience for the uncertainties of public interaction – are minimised by design – or even outwardly ruled out – in order to meet the social expectations of comfort (Pavoni and Brighenti 2017). To be sure, we are careful to avoid suggesting any conspiratorial, paranoid, or deterministic reading of these changes, which are not to be understood as linearly flowing from intentional centres of power, nor as being homogenous and all-encompassing. Urban atmospheres are complex and fragmented emergent fields punctuated by countless failures, opacities, glitches, and conflicts. In them,

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[8] It is just the case to recall here that Goffman (1967: 15) himself described face-work as a form of savoir-faire.

[9] See for instance the following passage: 'It has been suggested thus far that the individual's immediate world can be one of two places for him: where easy control is maintained or where he is fully involved in self-preserving action. (The transition between the two places is produced by the justification or dissolution of alarm) […] The individual's ease in a situation presumes that he has built up experience in coping with the threats and opportunities occurring within the situation. He acquires a survivably short reaction time – the period needed to sense alarm, to decide on a correct response, and to respond. And as a result, he has not so much come to know the world around him as he has become experienced and practiced in coping with it' (Goffman 1971: 248-9).

intentions, strategies, and agency are distributed in complex and never fully predictable ways. It is nonetheless evident that the techno-juridical fabric of the urban is significantly shaped by the novel atmocultural logics so far described, with consequences on social interactions which cannot be overlooked, or simply read through the dialectical lens of oppression *vs* resistance. In particular, as we have seen, the urban politics of ease seems to have important repercussions on the production of normal appearances through the composition of environments where both the need and the motivation for actual individual intervention happen to be shrunk.

Towards a New General Partition of the Visible

Goffman was among the first to emphasise that public urban life unfolds in a condition of exposure and structural lack of control.[10] If, as we have observed, in the context of the atmocultural framework of urbanity, the minimisation of the stress caused by environmental uncertainty becomes imperative, in the long run stress does paradoxically increase, precisely to the extent that individuals become less skilled at coping with unpredictability, losing their capacity to react creatively in urban ways. In the contemporary urban domain, the processing *ex vivo* of the social flow is modified to the point that Goffman's ordered choreography gets fractured into several splintering choreographies. A conundrum follows from the performance of incompatible rhythms that are not in tune with one another, and intersect – or better, clash – often only in the cacophony of urban violence (Feltran 2020).

Contemporary fractured urban spaces are contradistinguished by 'rules of engagement' that seem to defy many of the ritualistic and deferential requirements so finely captured by Goffman. It may well be that the paradigm of civility is at pains because we live through more barbaric times than those of Goffman's (despite his lamenting 'the current unsafety and incivility of our city streets' [1971: ix]). Certainly, increased brutality does not rule all rituals out, but it reshapes them in the midst of a condition characterised by enhanced contestation of the civilised etiquette. Goffman himself was the first to remark a trend towards the deritualisation of services. However, he expressed the view that such

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[10] 'It is inevitable, then, that citizens must expose themselves both to physical settings over which they have little control and to the very close presence of others over whose selection they have little to say.' (Goffman 1971: 249)

deritualisation could only be premised upon *increased consensus*.[11] The foundations of such a moral-political quandary are deeply perceptual: the problem of *reading the environment* remains at the forefront of urban preoccupations. While Goffman highlighted the centrality of social reading through skills of scanning and externalisation, he did not have to question the existence of a bedrock of consensus around the subtended cultural grammar of publicness. This explains why he remained confident that 'interpersonal ritual is a powerful device for ordering events accommodatively' (Goffman 1971: 164).

Today, however, precisely to the extent that a bedrock of background consensus can no longer be taken for granted, we notice that a meaningful proportion of the ritualistic aspects of public interaction comes to be subrogated by increasingly pervasive legal and technological protocols. As a consequence, the process of 'interactional accommodation' evoked by Goffman is inevitably impacted upon, and the 'remedial rituals' get themselves 're-mediated' by a range of different technical media. From *remediation* understood as reparation of interpersonal interaction, we shift to *re-mediation* understood as the movement of a content across different media, in a way that replaces the sense of *immediacy* with the factual technical reality of *hypermediacy* (Bolter and Grusin 1999). This way, what is 'remedial work' in Goffman becomes a 'remediational process' in the contemporary urban hybrid assemblage of data, classifications, inferences and – increasingly more and more – *new constitutive rules*.

Here, we are not simply juxtaposing the phenomenological and the structural approaches to the social world: Goffman himself, while being clearly sympathetic with social phenomenology, was perfectly aware of the structural determinants of interaction – as for instance his analyses of mental institutions and the practices of confinement, segregation and stigmatisation attest (Goffman 1963b). Likewise, Goffman was not unaware of the possibilities inherent in the technological prolongations of situated perception, and the 'ever-extending network' produced by 'artificial receptors of various kinds, such as telephone, telegraph, radar screens, and the like' (Goffman 1971: 253-4). These, he recognised, may enlarge the individual *Umwelt* in remarkable ways. In this sense, his reflection can be easily accommodated with the development of further new media. Yet, the move we are suggesting also requires the reversal of the observational lens: today, it is less a question of social interactions adapting and adjusting to the contingency of their own

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[11] 'A great deal of consensus and mutual understanding is required to support service transactions executed without the help of social ritual.' (Goffman 1971: 37fn13)

unfolding, and increasingly more a matter of the urban space itself adapting in real time to social interactions – which, however, come already coded, mediated, formatted, and increasingly even 'pre-comprehended' by digital sieving and artificial intelligence algorithms. Mobile digital devices and captors, triangulated with satellite technologies, fed by data mining technologies, and filtered via machine learning algorithms, increasingly play the role of social mediators, for the most part working under the threshold of human perception, incorporating the barely perceptible teleologies of biosecurity, entertainment, and commercial valorisation. To take just one example among the many, the Trip Advisor platform allows a traveller to potentially bypass all interaction with locals that is deemed 'problematic', i.e. fraught with socio-cultural and linguistic adventures (Kinstler 2018). This is not to say that the traveller's movement will be blindly pre-determined by the platform but, more precisely, that said movement already occurs inside a 'platformed' urban space, whose trajectories of 'value and desire' unavoidably affect it (Brighenti and Pavoni 2021).

The prolongations and contractions produced by this novel condition reverberate onto public life in ways that can hardly be overlooked. In this context, it seems that issues of *visibility* are pivotal. More specifically, we are dealing with processes of in/visibilisation that do not only run parallel to the dialectic of civil in/attention, but also *slantwise vis-à-vis* it, as the technological triangulation discussed above reconfigures the thresholds for topological immersion into the urban. Manipulating visibility thresholds can thus pre-emptively *tilt* experience. So, for instance, our 'choice' to visit a specific restaurant or bar, with its specific atmospherics and local interaction order, cannot be said to be determined, yet is to various degrees *oriented* via information and 'notifications' of various kind organised and served by an economy of attention and reputation – well before we even begin pondering our choice, and mostly below the radar of our awareness. Different regimes of consciousness and attention are now involved in urban life, beyond the human ones, according to a new *general partition of the visible*. Goffman himself did take note of the 'movement of the surround,'[12] but he grounded such 'surround' in spatial perception at the individual level:

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[12] 'The Umwelt or surround is an egocentric area fixed around a claimant, typically an individual. However, individuals do not stay put, so the surround moves, too. As the individual moves, some potential signs for alarm move out of effective range (as their sources move out of relevance) while others, which a moment ago were out of range, now come into it. A bubble or capsule of events thus seems to follow the individual around, but actually, of course, what is changing is not the position of events but their at-handedness; what looks like an envelope of events is really something like a

It should now be plain that as the individual moves through the course of his day, the changing surround that moves with him is likely to contain many minor dealings with others that could have alarming significance for him. At many points he will be vulnerable to having his world played backwards. What makes this fate uncommon is not the difficulty of arranging it, per se, but the fact that most of those who might have a motive for making these arrangements do not think along these lines. And those who are willing and oriented lack the strategic information necessary in such designs: given what they want, they don't know who has it; given whom they know, they do not know what these potential victims can be separated from. Such stability as the individual has in his Umwelt derives in part from the fact that the right information is not in the wrong hands. (Goffman 1971: 319)

What the age of ambient computing increasingly brings about is, instead, the coalescence of a *lato sensu* cybernetic surrounding that actively rearranges itself according to social situations, unrolling subsequently within a matrix of calculable occurrences. This way, the notion of a surround that moves becomes both literal *and* independent from individual scanning and attentive processes. This happens to the extent that scanning and externalisation are increasingly performed by digital devices communicating in the first place with other devices and databases, and only secondly and subordinately with individual users. The 'right information' to be extrapolated thus turns out to be systematically out of reach of the urbanite as an individual being, laying scattered as it does across a vast informational landscape, not all of which can ever be made situationally present in the phenomenological sense.[13]

This way, live assessments about right and wrong, as well as about timey and untimely, are stripped of the self-corrective nature of classic public interaction, and relocated beyond the evaluative range of individual subjects. In his analysis of normal appearances, Goffman focused on the fact that individuals can afford to 'disattend' parts of their surrounding environment only to the extent that no particular 'design' effort can be detected in them – in other words, only insofar as those environments can be proven to be 'design-

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moving wave front of relevance. This notion of a moving bubble is only approximate.' (Goffman 1971: 255)

[13] One could also analyse the 'smart city' as precisely promising a phenomenological materialisation of effective information: consider, in this vein, the metaphor of the 'dashboard' for visualising city trends, a metaphor that has been embedded in dozens of software apps and platforms for urban governance. Mattern (2021) has recently conducted a brilliant critique of the 'top-down, technocratic vision' entailed by the urban dashboard.

unconnected.' This Goffman highlights as a key mechanism allowing public interaction to unfold smoothly:

> The fact that the individual can feel that much of what is present in his surround has no active relation on its own to his current design (whether to further it or hinder it) provides him a ground for treating this part of his immediate environment as given, as something he can disattend safely. (Goffman 1971: 312)[14]

In the era of ambient computing, by contrast, it is the 'surround' itself that comes to entertain an *active*, albeit *non-conscious*, relation to the individual: this now occurs in the form of machine-to-machine connection and communication. As a result, it becomes increasingly unlikely that our Umwelten might be completely disconnected from some form of design, although it is not always immediately clear which one. The extent to which these environments are 'design-connected' may not be homogeneous, and may empirically vary widely (Easterling, 2014) – in any case, one can no longer assume that subjective wellbeing must be premised upon the working assumption of absence of *contrivance* from the environment.[15] Indeed, we could venture to say that, in fact, *everything* in contemporary urbanism is *contrived* to some degree – a fact that in the smart city narrative gets explicitly celebrated in terms of real-time 'responsiveness,' or 'high-frequency city.' A whole set of new procedures of visibilisation is consequently put in place, such as those entailing a politics of notifications delivered to the user that alert him/her about events and news

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[14] The whole passage, before and after the quoted section, reads as follow: 'Every subject can perceive a locally occurring event to be something occurring quite incidentally, something happening alongside his own unfolding course of action but not purposely engineered to affect the outcome of this action. (Such a design-unconnected event may, of course, be a well-designed part of someone else's independent course of action, and furthermore the subject may well exploit the anticipated occurrence of the event in realizing his own project; yet its incidental character remains) … Often what he thus sees as neutral contains some or all of the persons present, persons who thereby require only civil inattention and involve themselves in his affairs only to the extent of according him the same courtesy. Whether, then, we deal with the inanimate or animate parts of the subject's Umwelt, we find that there is likely to be undesigned elements, and that he need but provide minimal carefulness to be secure in taking these elements for granted, as something to be disattended.' (Goffman 1971: 310-2).

[15] For Goffman, the subject's 'ease in his Umwelt depends not merely on his being able to divide events around him into the designed and undesigned, but also on his being confident that these appearances are not merely contrived – unless, of course, it is he himself who has contrived them' (Goffman 1971: 314).

reputed to be of concern. In many cases, such notifications drastically redefine the very notion of what is relevant to know about a given environment, and according to which order of priorities, thus actively and selectively guiding subsequent interactions.

Increasingly immersed in digital environments that appear to be structured in advance – and, more troublingly, structured by deep asymmetries of class, gender, race, age and ability invisibly built into the algorithmic infrastructure of the urban (e.g. Noble 2018; Benjamin 2019; Espeland and Yung 2019) – our capacity to pose – rather than solve – problems tends to shrink. In other words, algorithmic computation inserts a logic of 'solutionism' (Morozov 2014), which expropriates urban subjectivity of its natural problem-creating capability (McCullough 2013). This, Brubaker (2020: 779) argues, 'has created an entirely new techno-social infrastructure of selfhood, an entirely new ecology within which selves are formed and reformed.' Consequently, the preliminary work of 'setting the stage' of social interaction is removed and reduced to a question of solving problems in a *surround* increasingly pre-engineered by 'back-office' machine-to-machine communication (Brighenti and Pavoni 2021). Under such new atmocultural condition, it is as if the environment comes to be animistically populated by a host of invisible percipients and actors, whose activity alters, not simply the actual patterns of social interaction, but also the virtual space of possibilities where actual interaction eventually takes place. Accordingly, we suggest that a notable direction into which Goffman's social theory could be expanded today is precisely the recognition of an incipient *new urban animism*: in other words, as social scientists we need to attend more closely the technical and legal ensemble of animational techniques capable of preparing – if not precipitating – a number of 'animistic moments' that subtend everyday interaction (Brighenti and Kärrholm 2020).

Conclusion: Goffman, Expanded

Goffman has pioneered the study of 'situated activity system[s]' (1961: 96). In this piece, we have sought to show that *both* what counts as activity *and* where the boundaries of an activity system must be drawn, are being profoundly reshaped by a newly emerging atmocultural condition. In the discussion conducted above, we have focused in particular on those elements of Goffmanian sociology the author himself variously referred to as rules, norms, etiquette and codes. We have remarked in particular how, according to Goffman, interaction rituals are able to produce a fictional 'as though,' which is nonetheless quite effective for all the practical purposes of public life.

Rituals are never simply performances of norms, but also displays, glosses, gestural narrations, behavioural paraphrases that are *somehow related to* norms – a type of conduct characterised in legal philosophy as 'nomotropic.'[16] Goffman's ultimate interest in nomotropism lies in capturing the overall dynamics through which a workable order empirically emerges out of an inextricable compound of action and interpretation, of performance and comment, of drama and diegesis. His sociology is, in this sense, a sociology of 'tendencies' and 'emergences:' interaction exhibits it own tendencies, and it is through interaction that social order emerges, while concurrently the social bond asserts and reasserts itself.

This view is in accord with the Dukheimian insight that social life is wholly a natural process, albeit of a peculiar nature – moral, rather than physical or biological. But Goffman's sociology is also, and perhaps above all, a deeply Tardeian and Simmelian sociology: what matters to it is not so much the opposition of micro versus macro social dynamics, as much as the analytical shift towards that order of *the infinitesimal*, which both Tarde and Simmel had first laid out as the proper field of the social science. As remarked above, it is a whole grammar of social perception that Goffman has provided us with: in urban life, individuals 'glean' information from one another, they 'exude' and 'display' trust, or intentions about next moves, they advance 'claims' towards certain spaces, objects and services, they 'adjust' their own course of action in response to signals sent to them, leaked to them or just captured by them (sometimes through deception), and finally they 'rehearse' diplomatic scripts aimed at some sort of contingent compromise that avoids defacement and catastrophe as much as possible, or at least defers it for as long as possible.

Goffman depicted public interaction as an inherently fluid process with ample fringes of uncertainty, where 'a large number of infractions are compatible with maintaining an order' (1971: xi).[17] On this account, the regime of publicness is contradistinguished by a kind of loose integration, which however makes the regime even more resilient vis-à-vis variations, challenges and contestation than in the case of a rigid normative structure (incidentally, this explains why Goffman evokes Parsons only obliquely in the pages of *Relations in Public*). The remedial sequence 'deviation; restorative counteractions; reequilibration' can be achieved through the enactment of always partial and in most cases quite limited and blunt

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[16] On nomotropism and its consequences, see Brighenti (2004).

[17] From this perspective, the interaction order can be said to possess what René Thom in mathematics called 'structural stability.'

'corrective feedback' (*ibid*. 346-7). The whole discussion of normal appearances, one notices, is set in explicitly Darwinian terms – that is, in terms of *adaptation*. On the one hand, Goffman suggested, animals (among which, humans) exist under an imperative to survive, and that is why attentiveness to the environment is helpful and welcome; on the other hand, however, they also need to check the level of energy consumption required by their own processes of attentiveness, since devoting too much attention to protracted scanning would place too high an energy price on them, hampering other activities and tasks. It is within the range that exists *between* these two extremes that interaction itself deploys as an adaptive field, its uncertainty corresponding precisely to the *latitude* of vital adaptation.

The theoretical necessity to shift towards an infinitesimal register of analysis – and even, to an infinitesimal calculus of social life – finds here its ultimate underpinning: the fact is that the adaptive field itself is marked by bifurcation points. If, on the one hand, such field exhibits a structural stability that makes it resilient vis-à-vis mild, albeit constant, disturbances, it is on the other hand possible that minimal and apparently negligible tweaks initiate dramatic transformations (the latter we could call the 'Kafkian' factor). On this, Goffman pointed out the limits of the traditional normative social control model, clarifying that what really counts in the making of public life is never an actual behavioural compliance with norms, but the interpretation of a performed action, and the attribution of specific intentions to the parties involved.

It is at this point, we believe, that some aspects of atmoculture become noteworthy. As we have sought to illustrate throughout, the contemporary atmocultural requirements bring about a reconfiguration of urban individuality and urban subjectivity. The dense environment of urban data mining releases an atmospherics of calculation, algorithmically sieved by technical devices now capable of extracting patterns of attention and intention from virtually every single indexed quality of the environment. That these inferential rules may be just wrong is less important than the fact that they are *operative*; for indeed, in the new scenario, the interpersonal space of accounts, apologies, and requests – which Goffman held to be so essential to public life – gets reduced by the same proportion. While Goffman admitted that there were, in modern urban interaction, margins for deritualisation, he did not believe that the ritual component of interaction could be reduced beyond a certain threshold, for – as he famously put it – 'ritual work bears on the very nature of social acts' (1971: 351).

We live in a historical period when that threshold of public deritualisation has probably been passed, and the fact many social scientists have not yet recognises this fundamental transformation is linked to a bias of sort in their training that has systematically led them to subordinate the technological and 'infrastructural' aspects of social life to the moral ones. On the positive side, we could say they have been more attentive not to commit the fallacy of technological determinism. Yet, the balance between these spheres needs not be a simple trade-off, particularly if we take the perspective of immanence. Goffman issued a powerful invitation to the social scientist to install his/her gaze into the immanent unfolding of the social process; now, however, it is important to remind us that the immanent is not restricted to the phenomenologically given: the new general partition of the visible that is asserting itself in 21st-century urbanity corresponds to a whole ecology of technological devices and infrastructures that, as argued, recast the grammar of the phenomenal field.

Will artificial intelligence machine ever develop ritualistic behaviour? Until machines were simply 'programmed,' that could have hardly been expected to occur. However, to the extent that contemporary technological devices increasingly function on the basis of deep-learning algorithms, which are not deterministically programmed but rather left on their own to roam over large data sets out of which they abductively extrapolate rules and models to apply to future encounters, it is conceivable that these algorithms will progressively also incorporate into their activities some aspects of the ritualities still somehow naturally present in the datasets they are fed with. If this hypothesis proves correct, Goffmanian interactional sociology, and the ethnographic research informed and inspired by it, will still prove relevant in the coming future. We might perhaps even incur into a *return of rituality by other means*.

An interesting scenario might materialise before our eyes, for instance, the day self driving vehicles, largely based on machine learning algorithms, will begin to exhibit interaction rituals, such as for instance offering excuses when they commit a traffic offense, or when they have behaved rudely by puffing someone else's parking lot. They may even come up with new forms of rituals totally unknown to us, and they of course will apply ritualistic patterns both among themselves and in relation to us. Research domains such as *evolutionary robotics*, that contemplates the development of autonomous robotic systems capable of designing and producing by themselves further generations of robots, needs to be taken seriously by the ethnographers of social interaction. We hope to have shown how, precisely due to the uncertain future of rituality in urban life, Goffman's sociology needs to be expanded – *not* replaced! – so as to include into its analytical framework the

infrastructure, architecture, and datascape of an emerging 'algorithmic reason' capable of remediating interaction *ex vivo* in multiple unprecedented ways.

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