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Introduction to Everett C. Hughes' "Memorandum on Total Institutions"

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by Philippe Vienne

When he writes to his former student Erving Goffman his memorandum on total institutions, Hughes is fifty-nine years old and is full professor at the Department of Sociology of the University of Chicago. The memo is written almost one year after the end of Hughes' mandate as Chairman of the department. If we follow the comments that Helen Hughes writes (circa 1967) about the bibliography of her husband's work, Hughes has been since 1952 engaged in the University of Kansas Medical School project that would later give the book *Boys in white* (1961). He had published in 1952 *Where Peoples Meet,* "a set of lectures given in a course on racial and cultural contacts at University of Chicago," and he was about to publish *Men and their work* (1958). Hughes was also busy as editor of the *American Journal of Sociology.* Helen Hughes also reports that the paper that Hughes presented at the Second world congress in sociology at Liège is very representative of his rising popularity as teacher in Chicago: Hughes "now had lots of students doing theses on professions." Helen Hughes lists also their names: Ray Gold, Howard S. Becker, Anthony Weinlein, Horold McDowell, Ruth Kornhouser, Rue Bucher, and William Hale.[1]

The memorandum follows the usual writing style of Hughes regarding the lectures notes: following the course of his thoughts, as if thinking aloud, and giving some digressions, but not as much as in his lecture note on "bastard institutions." But the memo is conceived around a solid framework of three main concepts which prove

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[1] See Everett C. Hughes Papers, box 1, folder 3, "Annotated bibliography."

very useful to complete the theoretical framework that Goffman gave to his own work on total institutions. The first concept regards the element of "constraint" in the total institutions. Hughes provides also the word "restraint" as having a similar meaning. This first concept allows to study any institution around the issue of "captivity" of its members. This raises a few related questions: the level of freedom and autonomy of will that are available to enter or leave an institution. Hughes completes the picture by a subtle comment on the fact that sometimes it is difficult to determine which side is the "captive" in an institution. This remark is very useful when one seeks to study institutions such as the warship [see Zurcher 1965] or the monastery: inmates are the only ones in "captivity" or is the staff somehow "captive" too? The second concept is that of "totality." This means that a person is totally supported by an institution. When Hughes discusses the case of the Theresienstadt concentration camp as a Nazi institution, with some inmates coming to imitate the style of their tormentors, his remark about the "phantastic bastard or perverse identification of inmates with their masters" proves very useful. It is the heart of the discussion on the psychosocial impact that a (more or less) total institution may have on its inmates, thus raising the question of a possible "resocialization" of these inmates [or something similar to Peter Berger's concept of "alternation," see Berger and Luckmann 1966]. The "dystopia" of the Nazi regime and its institutions can be usefully compared with other utopian institutions mentioned by Hughes: the company towns, where utopia is consistent with totality. The third concept is that of "agency," or as Hughes suggests, the issue of the "third party" involved, in the background of the opposition between staff and inmates. In other words: "What are they there for, who are they there for, who are the parties involved, who is acting on whose behalf?" In this regard, Hughes points to Goffman the complementarity of these issues with those he will address in his coming article on "Licence and mandate."

This set of three concepts could in itself provide a useful table in order to classify and compare institutions between them. But this table could easily be enlarged and completed with other related questions raised by Hughes: is there an informal authority among the inmates (generating for example kangaroo courts)? Is there a division in the institution between high staff and low staff (attendants), this inducing divergent rules coming from different interpretations of the objective of the institution? And finally, is there a discrepancy between the official function and the informal function of an institution? Following the Hughesian principle of "perspective by incongruity" [see Coser 1994, 11] which means that unusual comparisons between very different institutions (or professions) can be fruitful, we will fill this table with the list of those institutions who came to Hughes's mind when he dictated his memo: the monastery and convent, the boarding school, the school, the turpentine camp, the

chain gang, the mental hospital, the mining camp, the ship, Grand Central Station, the concentration camp, the totalitarian state, the company town, Gordon Ericksen's community of mechanics, Theresienstadt, the sectarian communities, the prisons, the tuberculosis [TB] hospital, the hospital. This table will be left empty so that the reader can try his way to the exercise of a Hughesian comparison by incongruity.

	Restraint/ Constraint (captivity)	Totality	Agency (the third party)	Informal authority	High staff/ low staff (rules)	Functions (official/ hidden)
monastery/convent						
boarding school						
school						
turpentine camp						
chain gang						
mental hospital						
mining camp						
ship						
Grand Central Station						
concentration camp						
totalitarian state						
company town						
Gordon Ericksen's team						
Theresienstadt						
sectarian community						
prison						
TB hospital						
hospital						

TAB. 1. A Hughesian table on total institutions

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Abstract: The intellectual relationship between Everett C. Hughes and his student Erving Goffman has attracted the attention of historians of American sociology since the death of these two sociologists. The thesis of a unilateral relationship, Goffman publicly praising Hughes (but only at the end of his life), and Hughes being resistant to this mark of allegiance, has long prevailed from the existing sources. A stimulating article by Gary D. Jaworski has challenged this version, claiming from study of the archival material that this relationship was much more complex. Jaworski's thesis suggests there was even a master-apprentice relationship between Hughes and Goffman. Based on an extended work on archival material, this paper is an attempt to supplement or revise some of this last argument regarding the first part of Goffman's career since the Ph.D., namely his work on total institutions. Regarding total institutions, a major influence from Hughes on Goffman, veiled by the latter, can be revealed by careful study of various published and unpublished sources, Hughes even claiming the authorship to the concept of total institution. The heart of Hughes' argument on the authorship, however, rests upon a mysterious lecture note, often mentioned by him but that he was never able to found in his archives. This is the enigma of the total institution.

Keywords: *Everett C. Hughes, Erving Goffman, institutions, total institutions, Chicago school.*

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