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The Gunman Downstairs

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Hill, Michael R. 1992. "The Gunman Downstairs." (Formal remarks presented to my Social Problems course, SOC 201, at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln on October 13, 1992).

THE GUNMAN DOWNSTAIRS¹

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EXACTLY 24 HOURS ago, in this building,² nearly two dozen of your fellow students fled from Room 112, downstairs, in mortal terror of being murdered by a classmate in a senior-level actuarial science class. Newspaper accounts of this event present a particularly vivid example of the frame concepts that Erving Goffman explicates in *Frame Analysis*. In particular, Arthur McElroy's entrance into Room 112 was a "guided doing" by which he willfully intended to kill at least a few, if not all, of his classmates.

"For a second," said a student in the class, "I just sat there in a daze." Said another, "I thought he was kidding at first. I didn't think it was real." From the calm frame of students reading newspapers while waiting for a class to start, the frame was shattered completely in a split second. This is a particularly violent and extreme example of what Goffman calls a "frame break," when we are conscious of the fact that we do not know what frame holds and we begin asking, "what is going on here?" as if our life depended on it. In a split second, said one student, "I was really scared. I thought my life was in danger." "There were chairs falling all over. There was a sense of panic."

One frame was broken and another, radically different frame was established in the twinkling of an eye, together with the generation of what Goffman calls "the manufacture of negative experience," i.e., the creation of alienation when frames shift too radically or too violently, or too often for a sense of equilibrium to be easily maintained. Repetitions of yesterday's events would be extremely unsettling to the campus as a whole, generating negative experience on a massive scale. It turns out that Mr. McElroy's weapon did not fire when the MI-1 carbine, loaded with 30 live rounds,

¹ Remarks presented to the students in my Social Problems course at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln on October 13, 1992. Inasmuch as the class was reading Goffman's *Frame Analysis* at the time of this understandably unsettling event, I took it as my professorial responsibility to address the direct applicability of the concepts then under close study.

² Ferguson Hall, on the University of Nebraska campus in Lincoln, Nebraska.

jammed as McElroy leveled it at his classmates and pulled the trigger. This was either a “fortuitous event” and/or a “muffing”— we may never know which. More puzzling, we do not at this point have a ready explanation to account for McElroy’s behavior in a causal sense. When asked for a motive, instructor Colin Ramsay said, “That is a question we are asking ourselves.” The motive remains, at this point, an “astounding complex” to be placed on hold and resolved at a future date. James Griesen, UNL Vice Chancellor for student affairs, however, offered a culturally acceptable, psychologically-oriented formula when he was interviewed by the press. He stated, “This is the type of psychological breakdown we saw at the University of Iowa,” referring to the 1991 shooting of six people on the Iowa City campus.

What I call to your attention today is the fact that no news story offered a serious structural or institutional analysis of yesterday’s potentially murderous event. The structural vulnerability of college classrooms to mechanized violence was effectively skipped over by UNL Police Chive, Ken Cauble, when he said, “You feel pretty helpless when something like that happens and [the police] aren’t there to take care of it when it occurs.” I ask you, is it all possible to expect that the campus police could be on hand in such circumstances except by extreme fortuitousness?

Issues raised by yesterday’s event include: (a) the general vulnerability of modern life, (b) the escalation of the potential for mechanized violence in the modern world, and (c) the question of why is there an armed police presence on the UNL campus, presumably a center of rational action, when such a force is “pretty helpless” to counter the vulnerability of our everyday lives to mechanized violence.

The next few days will bring many explanations for McElroy’s behavior. Some you will accept as reasonable, others as hair brained, racist, or otherwise unacceptable. The overriding message, however, will be that events such as yesterday’s harrowing attack are *rare*. We will be encouraged to conclude that the world is, after all, a relatively safe place—especially the campus of UNL. I ask you, however, to hold onto your justifiable anxieties a bit longer, before we all go back to sleep—as Goffman would put it—and reflect structurally on our everyday vulnerabilities as individuals and as a society. We can take this opportunity to ask ourselves: how do we go on, day-after-day, living in a world that can at any moment fall apart at the seams without warning? Each of us will have different answers. If, after thinking seriously and privately about these issues, any of you would like to make a statement or discuss your reflections with this class, you are invited to share your thoughts with us when we meet again on Thursday.
