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Bomb Talk: Framing the Unthinkable

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THESIS

Our cultural apparatus appears ill-equipped, if not unable, to conceptualize or frame the present nuclear reality in a way that lets us effectively come to grips with it as it really is: a deployed, targeted, industrialized capacity to instantaneously annihilate all human life. This paper demonstrates that we key or transform our nuclear reality in virtually every conceivable way, thus normalizing it and treating it culturally the same as any other phenomenon, including the most mundane. I argue therefore that we have before us the immense and challenging task of finding a way -- working with flawed and inadequate intellectual tools -- to transcend the fundamental constructs of an outmoded and deeply imbedded cultural framework for "making sense of" events in our world. We apparently require a new cultural invention, comparable in magnitude to language, writing, or numbers before we can both grasp and solve the nuclear menace. Our present techniques, be they books, lectures, protests, debates, are not working. We need a new cultural framework, and it is our task as cultural laborers to develop it.

GOFFMAN'S PRIMARY FRAMEWORKS

We interpret things in terms of two primary frameworks:
(1) natural laws, such as those found in physics, chemistry, and biology, and (2) guided doings which "incorporate the will, aim, and controlling effect of a live agency." Example: The bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki do not escape our basic, fundamental ways of explaining our world to ourselves. The bombing was a guided doing by the U.S.A. that utilized basic knowledge of nuclear physics.

BRIDGE EXPLANATIONS

Bridge explanations (my term) help us account for events that do not fit cleanly into the two primary frameworks, thus preserving the epistemological coherence of the primary frameworks.

(1) A "muffing" occurs when the control normally expected in a guided doing is absent or temporarily lost.

(2) A "stunt" displays remarkable control where none is expected. Goffman defines it as "the maintenance of guidance and control by some willed agency under what are seen as nearly impossible conditions."

(3) An "astounding complex" involves an intellectual holding action, that is, we "expect that a 'simple' or 'natural' explanation will soon be discovered" to account for something when no reasonable explanation is readily at hand. Goffman argues: "In our society, the very significant assumption is generally made that all events -- without exception -- can be contained and managed within the conventional system of belief. We tolerate the unexplained but not the inexplicable."

(4) Unexplained events can also be accounted for as "fortuitous," as when a competently performing person "meets with the natural workings of the world in a way he could not be expected to anticipate, with consequential results. Or two or more unconnected and mutually unoriented individuals, each properly guiding his own doings, jointly bring about an unanticipated event that is significant."

KEYS

According to Goffman, keys are identifiable sets of conventions or rules by which an activity already "made sense of" in terms of the two primary frameworks is transformed into something patterned on this activity but is clearly understood by all concerned to be something quite different. The major categories of keys are outlined below.
(1) **Make Believe**: By this term, Goffman refers to the imitation or running through of the activity that is keyed "with the knowledge that nothing practical will come of the doing."

(a) **Play and Playfulness**: Goffman refers here to "relatively brief intrusions of unserious mimicry."

(b) **Daydreams and Private Fantasy**

(c) **Dramatic Scriptings**: Included here are the productions offered "to the public through the media of television, radio, newspapers, magazines, books, theater."

(i) **Novels**

(ii) **Television Dramas**

(iii) **Legitimate Theater**

(iv) **Motion Pictures**

(v) **Poetry**

**Your Attention Please** (excerpt)

by Peter Porter

The Polar DEW has just warned that
A nuclear rocket strike of
At least one thousand megatons
Has been launched by the enemy
Directly at our major cities.
This announcement will take
Two and a quarter minutes to make,
You therefore have a further
Eight and a quarter minutes
To comply with the shelter
Requirements published in the Civil
Defence Code--section Atomic Attack.
A specially shortened Mass
Will be broadcast at the end
Of this announcement--
Protestant and Jewish services
Will begin simultaneously--
Select your wavelength immediately
According to instruction
In the Defence Code. Do not
Take well-loved pets (including birds)
Into your shelter--they will consume
Fresh air. Leave the old and bed-
ridden, you can do nothing for them.
Remember to press the sealing
Switch when everyone is in
The shelter. Set the radiation
Aerial, turn on the geiger barometer.
Turn off your Television now.

(vi) Popular Music

**Man at C & A**

by The Specials (Dance Craze soundtrack album)

Warnin' warnin' nuclear attack  
Atomic sources designed to blow your mind  
World War III  
Nuclear nuclear attack  
Rocking atomically in this third world war  
Atomic sounds  
The man in black he told me the latest Moscow news  
about the storm across the Red Sea  
They drove their ballpoint views  
I'm the man in grey, I'm just the man at C & A  
And I don't have a say in the wargames that they play  
Warnin' warnin' nuclear attack  
Shock attack to hit you in the back  
World War III  
The Mickey Mousebunch told the Ayatollah at his feet  
You'll drink your oil you schmuck, we'll eat our heads of wheat  
But I'm the man in grey, I'm just the man at C & A  
And I don't have a say in the wargames that they play  
Don't chuck another bomb  
Nuclear nuclear nuclear war  
Warnin' warnin' nuclear attack  
The bomb will never fall  
Shock attack.

**Rendez-vous with Radiation**

by Rob Bolland (Domino Theory album)

Bombs exploding, silver shadows in the night  
Plans unfolding, telling me we're gonna die  
Vision's fading, burning fires in the night  
Should have stayed in, it's not safe to be outside  
Rendez-vous with radiation  
Rendez-vous with radiation  
I know it's never gonna be the same  
Watch the fallout, got so save ourselves somehow  
Soldiers call out, nothing here can save us now  
Rendez-vous with radiation  
Rendez-vous with radiation  
I know that it's never gonna be the same.
(vii) Names
(viii) Slogans
(ix) Jokes

(2) Contests

(3) Ceremonials

(4) Technical Redoings: Technical redoings involve performing an activity out of its usual context with the understanding that the original outcome of the activity will not occur, yet the redoing is still for a utilitarian purpose.
(a) Practicing
   (i) Simulations
   (ii) Rehersals
   (iii) Planning
(b) Demonstrations
(c) Replays
   (i) Documentation
   (ii) Exhibits and Museums
(d) Group Psychotherapy and Role-Playing
(e) Experiments

CONCLUSION

This nuclear based tour of Goffmanian keys has a purpose: to remind ourselves of the extreme flexibility our epistemology and transformational rules permit. They allow us to key at will, to make jokes, movies, novels, experiments, slogans, museums, etc. based upon the most deadly peril our world has ever faced. I submit that we ought to be wary when we key, fabricate, or otherwise transform nuclear annihilation in the same way that we key other socially important but far less serious events such as, for example, AIDS and teenage suicide (both of which have their full complement of jokes, songs, poetry, television dramas, talk show discussions, fund raisers, and self-help groups). We now act on the nuclear threat/reality in exactly the same way, writing letters to congresspersons, organizing talk shows, fund raisers, petitions, television ads, newsletters, and staging marches, demonstrations, and teach-ins. I noted in the introduction to this paper that such activities are not without merit, but their values lies not in their ability to end or reduce the nuclear threat/reality. We must be careful not to confuse these keyed activities with serious actions actually designed to terminate our present global capacity for annihilation. In the same way, those of us with intellectual commitments to end the nuclear threat must also be very careful not to confuse our standard academic practices with the serious, unprecedented cultural work now required to give our society the much improved tools it needs to come to grips with and eliminate our lethal nuclear reality. It may well be, much to our chagrin, that all of our rational debate and reasoned thinking is rapidly paving the way to the final nuclear disaster. All the while our words flow and flower in key after key, the deployed nuclear arsenal grows and grows. Is our present work a lullaby that only deepens our Goffmanian slumber? I think the possibility is strong that we are asleep, culturally speaking, and it is now time to wake up and get to work. We have before us the task of finding a way to transcend the fundamental constructs of an outmoded and deeply rooted cultural framework for "making sense of" things in our socially constructed world.
WHITE MEN IN TIES DISCUSSING MISSILE SIZE
Lunch On Warning

Matthew Finch, United States
Women dancing on a missile silo, Greenham Common,
1 January 1983