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THE PAST AND FUTURE OF 'SYMBOLIC INTERACTIONISM'

An important line of sociological thought extending back to Rousseau through Durkheim has recently been revitalized in France, largely through the works of Claude Lévi-Strauss (e.g., 1967) who has discovered semiotics at the heart of the Durkheimian enterprise. It would be more correct to say 're-discovered' because it was Durkheim (1965: 264) himself who wrote in a passage that is not in the least obscure: "social life, in all its aspects and in every period of its history, is made possible only by a vast symbolism".

This article is on semiotics in American sociology. I draw together fragments of a sociological semiotic already in existence and attempt to assemble these in an orderly fashion. In writing the article, I found it necessary to devise some new elements as well — American sociology does not at the present time contain a complete semiotic.

I have stressed *American* sociology because it is a field with which I am familiar by training. The influence of Durkheim in American now is stronger than ever before, but there is no organized awareness in American sociology, as there is in France, of the potential that resides in the development of semiotics in the context of empirical studies of social life. I find this to be a paradox and perhaps a sign of a serious deficiency in graduate departments of sociology for the following two reasons: (1) a primitive sociological semiotic has long existed in American sociology in the variant called 'symbolic interactionism'; and (2) unlike their European colleagues, American sociologists are most comfortable working at the level of individual behavior and face-to-face interaction, an empirical domain which has yielded to scientific understanding only insofar as the investigator develops a semiotic of it. Erving Goffman's respected study of *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* is also the 'last word' in the Symbolic Interactionist school.

American sociologists like to think of Durkheim's dictum "to treat a social fact as a thing" in its most deterministic sense, as a force, external and coercive, which weighs heavily on the individual and prevents him from developing his true humanity. They tend to ignore those passages on 'collective effervescence' wherein Durkheim describes the ways the individual may be elevated by society and projected beyond his own animal existence,