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Abstract

In this paper, I discuss Erving Goffman's approach to demonstrations in terms of theatrical performances. Drawing on empirical observations, I show that demonstrations cannot be viewed as theatrical performances without thoroughly studying the audiences' complex relationships to the fictions and realities at stake. I argue that such a view also calls for an in-depth study of the nature of audiences and of the dynamics that drive them.

Keywords: Performance, Theater, Fiction, Demonstration, Demo, Simulation.

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Many social practices are easily described in terms of performance. Such is the case of what is commonly called “demonstration.” To what extent can we indeed view demonstrations as performances?

In order to address this issue, I would like to discuss Erving Goffman’s approach to demonstrations in terms of theatrical performances. I will first present his framework of analysis. I will show in particular how, according to Goffman, demonstrations are perceived by social actors as simulations having utilitarian purposes. I will show the scope and limitations of his representation, based on various observations, including my own. I will also question the relevance of certain features of the audiences of demonstrations as presented by Goffman.

But first, what does “demonstration” mean? This term stems from the Latin *demonstratio*. According to the Oxford dictionary (2015), it refers to four main types of objects: 1. an act of showing that something exists or is true by giving proof or evidence; 2. an outward show of a feeling or quality – i.e. a physical demonstration of affection; 3. a practical exhibition and explanation of how something works or is performed – a microwave cookery demonstration, for instance; 4. a public meeting or march protesting against something or expressing views on a political issue – i.e. a demonstration against a new tax.

These definitions highlight the fact that demonstrations correspond to a set of objects and practices that are quite well identifiable, despite their relative diversity. Let us examine now how Goffman (1974) approaches them in his book *Frame Analysis*, as part of his dramaturgical approach to social life.

Simulations

According to Goffman, “demonstration” refers to a peculiar type of practice. His definition does not match all the meanings generally ascribed to the term. “Demonstration” refers to a “performance of a tasklike activity out of its usual functional context in order to allow someone who is not the performer to obtain a close picture of the doing of the activity”

(Goffman 1974, p. 66). Thus, the author views demonstrations as a specific type of “technical redosings,” that is,

strips of what could have been ordinary activity [that] can be performed, out of their usual context, for utilitarian purposes openly different from those of the original performance, the understanding being that the original outcome of the activity will not occur. (Goffman 1974, p. 58-59)

“Technical redosings” constitute for Goffman a type of keying, while a key is defined as

the set of conventions by which a given activity, one already meaningful in terms of some primary framework, is transformed into something patterned on this activity but seen by the participants to be something quite else. The process of transcription can be called keying. (Goffman 1974, p. 43-44)

In other words, Goffman’s definitions lead us to view demonstrations as simulations of actions having utilitarian purposes and to think that audiences of demonstrations view them this way. Goffman had in mind very specific examples of demonstrations that matched his definition. In reality, these examples fit into the category of public demonstrations of technologies, also often called “demos.” The author evokes several cases: that of a salesman who shows to a housewife how to use a vacuum cleaner to suck up the dirt that he has spilt on the floor; that of a nurse who explains to a mother how to wash her baby; a presentation to soldiers of how a piece of artillery works; a demonstration of safety procedures to passengers of an airplane.

In his book, Goffman delivers a fairly rapid analysis of these practices. His analysis is based on a few sequences of everyday life. It is fueled by his reading of newspaper articles. It mainly consists in putting forward some social constraints that weigh on demonstration practices. According to Goffman, the costs of demonstrations must be low compared to those involved in the simulated activity. At the same time, demonstrations should not be too realistic in many cases, as a matter of decency for instance. In this regard, Goffman evokes the cases of advertisements for deodorants or toilet paper. He also mentions the examples of demonstrations of guerrilla techniques and of protests monitoring.

Goffman’s framework of analysis and his limited inquiries help us understand why the author reduces demonstrations to technical redosings, and why he does not view demonstrations as possibly falling into one of the four other types of keys he defines: “make-

believe,” “contests,” “ceremonials,” and “regroundings” (Goffman 1974, p. 48, 56, 58, 74). Similarly, he does not conceive how demonstrations could be seen by their audiences as primary realities and not only as transpositions or mutually agreed fictions.

Fiction and/or reality

My observations and various studies show that audiences of demonstrations may view these presentations as fiction and/or reality depending on many elements. In some cases, like those described by Goffman, members of the audience indeed seem to be aware of the simulation that is taking place before their eyes and of the usefulness of the presentation. In such circumstances, it indeed appears relevant to talk of processes of transcription and mutually agreed fiction (Lunenfeld 2000, p. 13-26).

However, in other cases, members of the audience appear to view the demonstration in a more ambiguous way. Its fictitious dimension may be ignored, at least in part, or temporarily forgotten. This phenomenon is well known to social scientists who study how spectators react to works of fiction, such as theater plays or television series for instance (Chalvon-Demersay 2012). In the latter case, the actors are often identified by the viewers as the characters they play. This may happen during, or between, viewing sessions. As a result, it is often difficult for actors of television series to play more than one role.

Similar phenomena can be observed in the case of public demonstrations in science. During certain public experiments, only specialists are able to perceive the tricks at work, while at least part of the mainstream public believes that they have direct and non-problematic access to natural phenomena (Collins 1992).

Conversely, scholars in a given field of knowledge may well lose sight of a public demonstration’s fictitious character, unlike non-specialists. This may be witnessed for instance during a demo that shows how a double inverted pendulum may be controlled thanks to artificial intelligence (Rosental 2004). An inverted pendulum is a pendulum balancing on its base. A double pendulum oscillates at two distinct levels. For engineers working in the aerospace industry, controlling a double inverted pendulum is emblematic of controlling a space rocket during takeoff. It is important to control the rocket’s vibrations as it can break in half if they are too intense. To this extent, in such a successful demo, an engineer working in the aerospace industry can literally see the mastering of a technological problem involving

billions of dollars of investment. However, most non-specialists see nothing else but a device of little interest during this demo, since they ignore the link with the problem of the space rocket's take-off, or since they consider this link quite artificial.

Thomas Kuhn analyzed comparable phenomena when he introduced his notion of paradigm based on *Gestalttheorie* (Kuhn 1962). He showed how scientists shared peculiar ways of viewing the reality within a given paradigm. These views cannot be easily distinguished from perceptions of a primary reality.

As a matter of fact, several observations and studies show that many demonstrations use theatrical conventions to play with ambiguity, oblivion or the public's collusion with respect to the demonstration's fictitious dimension. For example, audiences are generally expected to assess technologies in a less rigorous way during demos than in the framework of written presentations that aim to provide comprehensive information and multicriteria analysis (Lampel 2001). Some demonstrators use demos to lead potential customers or investors to adhere to their promises or technological utopias in spaces such as innovation fairs. They aim to defuse the audience's critical thinking for some time, by diverting their attention from the limitations or difficulties of the technological project. Several elements are useful to the demonstrators to try to obtain the public's complicity or their favorable impression. These include playing with the imagination of the spectators, their emotions and their pleasure to discover new paths, to be surprised and to believe in the unexpected. For this purpose, many devices and dramaturgical conventions are implemented by demonstrators, starting with the staging of demonstrations.

So, for example, Steve Jobs rented the San Francisco Symphony Hall for the launching of the NeXT computer in order to enable such a let-go experience (Lampel 2001). He hired a theater director with an expertise in multimedia presentations. The setting consisted of a vase of flowers and an unknown object hidden by a black cloth. Steve Jobs graphically presented the history of the computer industry before he introduced NeXT. In the tradition of magicians and daredevils, he warned the audience that the performance might not work well. In doing so, he underlined the revolutionary character of the machine and shielded himself from the consequences of a failure. He explained at one point (Stross 1993, p. 178):

I would like to remind you of the first two laws of demoing [Some laughter]. First law of demos is that demos will always crash. And the second law of demos is that their

probability of crashing goes up with the number of people watching [more laughter and applause]. So if something goes wrong today, have some compassion for the demo-er.

The demo consisted of a presentation of the content of the digital library of the machine, including excerpts from Martin Luther King's speech "I have a dream," and music recordings. It also consisted of a duet performed by the computer with a violinist from the San Francisco Symphony Orchestra. This demo was not intended to be flatly realistic. Nor was it simply based on a convention relating to the fictitious character of the demo from beginning to end. It aimed both to make some working features of the technology tangible and to make the public adhere to a utopian vision of its uses.

Some surveys show, however, that demonstrations, and in particular demos, are used to make pure illusions appear as primary realities. Some studies portray demonstrators on local markets as hypnotists mesmerizing their audience (Duval 1981), while crowds of protesters are depicted as sleepwalkers influenced by crazy hypnotists (Tarde 1903). Some observations show that it is difficult to distinguish certain demos from conjuring, in so far as they tend to draw the attention of the audience to peculiar elements in order to make people lose sight of other essential aspects, such as technical limitations. Besides, in several cases, public demonstrations of technology display devices that are designed for the presentations, while they do not exist as functional tools. Some authors have called them "vapourware products." This expression refers to ghost technologies. It was used in particular for personal digital assistants in the 1990s which essentially worked in the framework of demos (Markoff 1996).

Two SunSoft engineers, Annette Wagner and Maria Capucciati, actually testified about how they created and demonstrated a system that ended up never becoming a real product. On the other hand, it was an impressive interface for marketing events (Wagner and Capucciati 1996). Some interviews confirm the use of versions of software for demos that may be distinguished from versions intended for users (Smith 2009). Some case studies also highlight how demos do not always show the real functionalities of prototypes at a given time. They may instead display results that have not yet been achieved, or may be ambiguous about them. These phenomena may be observed in particular when developers are under intense pressure to obtain results swiftly and to present their work frequently (Rosental 2007, Coopmans 2010). These examples may be supplemented by many others. These include Colin Powell's demonstration of the alleged presence of weapons of mass destruction in Iraq at the

UN headquarters in 2003. One may also include demonstrations of products that salespersons at fairs present as manufactured in European countries in order to highlight their robustness, while they are in fact made in China (Le Velly 2007). This wide range of cases helps understand why some social scientists have focused on demonstrations of non-existent objects, to the point that some have defined demos as displays of the possibility of a real object, rather than its actualization (Barry 2001, p. 178).

If the fiction/reality dichotomy has thus to be applied with care and nuance to describe demonstrations at work, it is also important to question the relevance of the Goffmanian approach to their public. Goffman's examples of demonstrations portray audiences consisting of isolated and interchangeable individuals. But one is entitled to question that the audiences of demonstrations always comply with this model.

Demonstrations' audiences

The inquiries I have conducted on demonstrations show that this type of setting is by no means the rule. For example, I have been able to witness how audiences at the Paris fair are largely made up of groups of friends, couples, and families. These groups react collectively to the demonstrations and their members interact with one another during the demos. Some demonstrators are the first to identify the couples' dynamics and try to use them as they run their demos. A demonstrator explained to me, for instance, how women play a leading role in assessing and purchasing kitchen tools, even though they are usually keen on conferring with their partner before doing so. In addition to gendered behavior, he also referred to stratified and ethnic behaviors. For example, he identified middle-aged women from the French Caribbean as spectators of great value. In his view, these women were often receptive to demonstrations and likely to buy products, which generated snowball effects among other members of the audience.

The following extract of a newspaper article highlights a similar analysis made by a demonstrator at a fair in Metz. In an article entitled "the demonstration-sale cannot be improvised," the journalist reported (*Le Républicain Lorrain*, October 6, 2013):

The method that Gregory uses to convince his potential clients consists in getting them involved. 'The skeptics roll up their sleeves and try their hand in front of everyone; it generally goes well. And the wife cheers her husband on doing the job.'

Although these phenomena are quite visible, they have received little attention from sociologists who have studied demonstrators' practices in fairs. Indeed, analysts have generally presented these audiences as made of relatively homogeneous individuals who do not interact with one another. The Goffmanian approach may have been quite influential in this respect. Indeed, this approach tends to stylize the actors and to deprive them of many social characteristics.

The case of fairs is not unique in this respect (Thébaud-Sorger 2009). Another example may be mentioned, namely that of audiences of demos carried out within firms. These audiences are often highly structured by the struggles of organizational life. Their members may be made for instance of "clients" of an IT service provider and may have conflicting interests. Some studies show that audiences of demos may include in-house IT engineers who are opposed to a project promoted by an external service provider, equally hostile employees who do not communicate the information requested by the service provider, managers who prefer the short-term profit of their unit to a new investment, as well as accountants and salespersons who have opposing views on the project (Smith 2009). These members may struck alliances within the firm in favor of, or against the project that is presented during demos. Again, audiences do not always consist of isolated and interchangeable individuals that shape the audiences of Goffman's demonstrations.

Conclusion

To conclude, it appears that Erving Goffman's approach to demonstrations in terms of theatrical performances has some relevance, but also important limitations. In particular, demonstrations go beyond Goffman's view of them as "technical redosings." Indeed, demonstrations do not simply offer a close picture of the doing of an activity for learning or for evidential purposes. Moreover, they do not merely consist in transcribing an activity into another.

The limitations of Goffman's approach call for further investigations and analyses. In particular, I hope I have succeeded in showing how demonstrations cannot be fully viewed as performances, and especially as theatrical performances, without thoroughly studying the complex relationships of audiences to the fictions and realities at play. Such a view also calls for an in-depth study of the nature of audiences and of the dynamics that drive them.

More generally, as demonstrations appear to be routinely consequential across many “domains,” including economic life (i.e. as sales practices or tools for product design and launching), politics (i.e. as instances of collective mobilization or ways to shape, test, or persuade a large audience), and scientific and technological research, and as their various roles have been often studied separately when some of them deserve further analysis, it is high time demonstrations were viewed as the core of a fruitful field of research (Rosental 2013). Demonstrations are an object of interest not only for social studies of science, economic sociology, and political sociology, but also for general sociology and the social sciences at large, since they appear to be an important form of interaction by themselves, affecting the structuration of social relationships on a wide range of scales.

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