Totalitarian institutions and human engineering: A sociological reading

Youssef Laariny[1] and Dr. Khadija Zahi[2]

yousseflaariny2@gmail.com

1. PhD student, Faculty of Arts and Humanities, Cadi Ayyad University, Marrakech – Morocco.
2. Doctoral training in Communication, Entrepreneurship, and Cultural Development. Faculty of Arts and Humanities, Cadi Ayyad University, Marrakech – Morocco.
    Under the supervision of Dr. Khadija Zahi, khadijazaho@yahoo.fr

Abstract

The topic of total institutions serves as a fundamental entry point for understanding the complex relationship between power and the self within closed spaces. These institutions (from psychiatric hospitals to prisons and barracks) do not merely shelter individuals or regulate their behavior; they engage in a deeper act of reshaping them in a way that dissolves their individual privacy within a strict collective logic. From the very first moment, the newcomer is stripped of their name and assigned a number, and a uniform is imposed upon them. These rituals are not merely organizational procedures, but rather an announcement of a new "social birth," in which the individual leaves behind everything that connected them to the outside world. Based on the above, we pose the central question here : How does the totalitarian institution transform into a laboratory for the re-production of humans according to its own logic? And does it succeed in completely erasing individual identity, or do individuals, even in the most extreme moments of
subjugation, devise small strategies of resistance that preserve the spark of their original self?

2) Erving Goffman : From Field Observation to Critical Institutional Sociology

In the summer of 1955, Erving Goffman chose to enter the American social world thru the entrance of St. Elizabeths Hospital for Mental Diseases. His entry into this space was not as a doctor or a patient, but as a "recreational activities assistant" tasked with organizing matches and creating a competitive atmosphere within this healthcare institution. However, this task was merely an ethnographic cover that allowed him to delve into the corridors, approach the shadowy corners, and pursue what he later termed micro-interactions that weave the details of daily life within the closed space of the institution. Goffman did not view sports as an analytical subject in itself ; the exercises were exercises on the surface, but deep down, they represented a "social theater" where power relations between the staff and patients were revealed. When he asked to form two teams, he noticed that the nurse appointed the leaders without consulting anyone, while the

"stubborn" ones were seated in the back rows. And when he blew the final whistle, everyone returned to the same line, as if the match had been nothing but a brief break from the strict hierarchy.

Based on this field observation, Goffman worked on formulating the concept of reframing, where the sporting activity is stripped of its competitive meaning and is reframed as a disciplinary mechanism that reminds patients of their positions within the power hierarchy.

It is clear that Goffman applied what can be called the principle of magnification, starting from the small scene to understand the larger structure. The quick glance the nurse casts at his watch does not merely mean checking the time; it refers to an "institutional timetable" that determines the moments for eating, bathing, going to the yard, and locking the cells. As for the silence that accompanies the distribution of medications, it is not merely professional respect, but a discriminatory procedure that distinguishes between those who deserve an explanation and those who only merit a brief nod. Thus, micro-interactions transform into windows that reveal the depth of the institution's coercive structures.

2-1 From Field Observation to Theoretical Concept Goffman did not present the concept of the "total institution" impressionistically; rather, he built it thru his daily observations.

The sight of doors locked with metal keys became evidence of the "physical separation from the outside world." And serving food on metal trays became an indicator of "collective, regimented life," while a patient signing a form to retrieve their shoes before going out to the yard was seen as an example that even their simplest possessions were subject to staff oversight. In this way, the small details transformed into a "conceptual block" that explains the mechanisms of human reformation.

Thus, with the arrival of autumn 1955, Goffman's bag was filled with thousands of field notes. These notes were not just diaries, but the first seed of a comprehensive theoretical project. And when he later wrote "The Shelters" in 1961, he did not just convey what he saw, but framed it within a comprehensive conceptual framework such as "the total institution," "mortification," and "collective life." Thus, he established what can be called "critical institutional sociology," which reveals how closed spaces transform into social laboratories for reshaping the self.

3) The total institution as a closed space that reproduces time and place

Erving Goffman believes that total institutions are not merely large buildings with high walls and secure doors, but self-sufficient worlds, closed off from the outside, where individuals' lives are managed in the minutest details by a single transcendent authority. This self-sufficiency is not just an architectural or security outcome, but carries a profound symbolic significance at its core. It signifies the birth of a new social space, separate from the external worlds, with its own time and internal laws. The high ceilings, thick walls, and barred windows do not merely represent means of protection, but signs of the closure that separates the "inside" from the "outside." In this alternative universe, where the great binaries such as nite and day, work and rest, public and private, freedom and constraint are redefined. The institution here is not a transient station, but an alternative life that reshapes the individual from the moment of entry.

3-1 Abolishing Individual Time and Imposing Unified Collective Time

Goffman believes that within the total institution, individual temporal markers are erased and replaced by a strict collective time. The collective alarm at six in the morning does not just announce the start of the day, but imposes a unified rhythm on the bodies. This pattern extends to meals, bathing times, medication schedules, and even moments of entertainment. Time here does not flow with the flexibility of external daily life; rather, it is managed thru printed schedules, whistles, bells, and nominal lists. In Bourdieu's terms, it can be said that the institution produces a new "temporal habitus"; where the body is reprogrammed to live in constant synchronization with the institution's rhythm, thereby undermining one of the fundamental pillars of individual autonomy: control over one's own time.

3-2 Reshaping the Body Between Shaving and Uniforms The totalitarian institution reconstitutes the body as a raw material for reshaping.

The process begins with shaving the hair, which is not merely a hygienic or esthetic practice, but a symbolic ritual that announces the moment of mortification and the erasure of the previous identity. Hair, as an extension of bodily and intimate memory, is removed to transform the body into a neutral biological mass that can be molded. As for the uniform, it operates on two levels :

1. Removing social differences (class, gender, cultural) that distinguished the individual outside. Eliminating social

differences (class, gender, cultural) that distinguished individuals abroad.

2. Producing a new institutional identity where the physical mark becomes a sign of belonging to the institution rather than to the self. Creating a new institutional identity where the bodily mark becomes a sign of belonging to the institution rather than to the self. Thus, the body transforms from a "body-self" to a "body-symbol," where it is read not as an expression of an independent individual, but as a symbol of obedience and compliance.

3-3 The institution as an alternative social space that redefines human identity

The institution's tasks do not stop at reorganizing space, time, and the body, but rather redefine the human being itself. It forms a "social universe" with its own internal standards, where outside, the individual is defined thru complex relationships such as family, work, friends, hobbies, possessions, and personal time. As for the inside, his identity is reduced to a single relationship, that is, the relationship of submission to the crew. His humanity becomes valuable to the extent that he adheres to the schedule, wears the uniform, and uses the institutional language. Identity is produced here internally according to the institutional perspective, which redefines the individual's interest from the standpoint of the collective interest of the institution. Here lies the pinnacle of power: when the individual themselves becomes a bearer of institutional logic and a justification for their own existence.

3-4 When a person becomes a number.

Erving Goffman sees the process of "mortification" as the confiscation of the individual's symbolic self from the moment they enter the institution, where their clothes are taken, their belongings are searched, and they are given a number instead of their name. This initial procedure is not just an administrative action, but an intense social ritual that paves the way for a new social birth. The individual, who until recently was a "citizen" with a name, profession, history, and relationships, is surprised to find that all symbols of their identity are confiscated at once. The clothes that were an extension of his taste, the bag that carried his belongings, the watch that organized his time, all are stripped away before his eyes in a scene reminiscent of the rituals of transitioning from one life to another. Here begins the "imitation," which is the shedding of the previous self in favor of a new institutional self, where the relationship with the crew is the only permitted relationship.

3-5 The number replaces the name – from the individual toinstitutional classification.

Entering the institution's gate causes the individual to lose their social identity and have their name replaced with a number, thus achieving a fundamental step in the institutional classification process. The name, in human culture, is not just a means of identification, but a bearer of memory, meaning, and relationships. As for the number, it strips the individual of this symbolic weight and transforms them into an "administrative unit" that can be tracked, transferred, or punished without the need to invoke their social context. It is the first step of "depersonalization" to strip away the name as a symbol of individual identity and replace it with a bureaucratic symbol that facilitates the process of control.

3-6 Reception rituals : Toward the beginning of reconstructing secondary social identity.

The reception stage represents the first rite in the institutional transformation series (reception – inspection – dressing). Here, the individual is not received as a guest, but as a case in processing. He is asked to sit on a metal chair, sign papers, and wait. These seemingly simple actions carry a deep significance, as the institution receives him thru a language of orders and requests, not thru a language of welcome. From the very first moment, the hierarchical relationship between the "staff" and the "resident" is established, declaring that the power lies with the institution, and that the individual is invited to prove their readiness to submit.

3-7 Inspection rituals: From privacy to absolute transparency.

The inspection phase is considered a moment of symbolic exposure that announces the body is no longer the individual's property, but has become available to the institution. Pockets, shoes, and sometimes even the mouth and the body itself are searched. The search here is not just a means to prevent prohibited items, but a declaration of the principle of absolute transparency, as the individual must always be subject to inspection and surveillance. And at this moment, the idea of privacy is discarded, and the logic is established that personal freedom is no longer an inherent right, but a privilege granted or revoked according to the demands of institutional authority.

3-8 The Rituals of Dressing : Wearing the Institutional Identity

Dressing constitutes the final step in the rite of passage; wearing the uniform does not merely mean putting on a garment, but rather adopting a new identity. This uniform

serves essential functions, announcing allegiance to the institution instead of allegiance to the outside world. Enforcing a forced equality among all residents, which conceals class or cultural differences, expressing obedience, where wearing the uniform becomes a symbolic gesture of acceptance of the institutional logic. Thus, the triadic ritual (reception – inspection – dressing) is completed, which transfers the individual from a previous social state to a new "social birth": that is, an institutional person reshaped by the rules of totalitarian life.

4) Resistance : Survival Strategies
4-1 In the process of subjugation, there are the seeds of resistance.

Despite the comprehensive subjugation practiced by the totalitarian institution, the resident does not completely surrender. He invents small survival strategies, such as sarcasm, lying, hiding simple objects, or building informal relationships. These actions are not an overt revolution, but rather silent attempts to preserve the memory of the original self in the face of the process of "depersonalization." While the institution seeks to dissolve the individual within the collective system, the resident re-invents their self thru "arts of existence" that may seem trivial from the outside, but carry significant internal symbolic weight. It is not an open rebellion against authority, but rather tactical maneuvers that grant him a small critical distance between his dying self and the roles imposed on him.

4-2 Black Humor: Tearing the Symbolic Curtain of the Staff.

Sarcasm is the primary tool of resistance, as when a resident whispers to a colleague, "Today the doctor is distributing freedom by the spoonful" or calls the medications "forgetfulness pills" or describes the schedule as the "sacred hour." These phrases are not said in front of the staff, but they circulate secretly among the residents. Its primary function is not just entertainment, but to tear down the symbolic curtain that surrounds the staff. It transforms authority from a sacred entity into a human entity that can be mocked and is fallible, creating a symbolic distance that allows the resident to breathe.

4-3 Informal Relationships: A Network of Solidarity Within the Symbolic Prison

The residents build a network of informal relationships thru a variety of actions such as exchanging news, helping with tasks, and sharing food or medicine. This network is not recorded in administrative files, but it produces a counter-network that allows the individual to reproduce solidarity. When the resident gives an extra piece of bread to a colleague or covers their absence from the crew, they are not just providing material assistance; they are reminding themselves and others that they are still a community, not just isolated numbers. These small networks reproduce the logic of solidarity that the institution tried to eradicate. These acts embodying resistance behavior do not directly threaten the system, making them implicitly acceptable. As they are practiced daily, they become personal habits that nourish a sense of self. They do not change the institution's rules, but they preserve remnants of memory and inner freedom. In the words of Debord, these practices are "small thefts of time" that allow the individual to live moments of "real life" amidst the machine of death. It is not a revolution, but rather a proof that the self has not completely died, and that the "digital human" still carries within them another human being, who retains their true name even if whispered in the darkness.

5) Synthetic Summary

Based on the above, it is clear that the totalitarian institution is not merely a physical space that organizes individuals' lives, but rather a comprehensive social apparatus that reshapes time, body, and identity according to a strict authoritarian logic. It seeks to merge the individual into its internal system thru rituals of mortification and daily practices of control. However, the individual remains capable of creating small spaces for resistance that preserve a part of their self and remind them that they are not just a number within a closed system. Thus, Goffman's experience reveals that power, no matter how comprehensive, is always in conflict with the human insistence on clinging to the spark of their inner freedom.

References

Bourdieu, Pierre. Esquisse d'une théorie de la pratique. Genève : Droz, 1972.

Debord, Guy. Commentaires sur la société du spectacle. Paris : Gallimard, 1988.

De Certeau, **Michel**. L'invention du quotidien. 1. Arts de faire. Paris : Gallimard, 1980.

Foucault, Michel. Surveiller et punir. Naissance de la prison. Paris : Gallimard, 1975.

Goffman, Erving. Asylums: Essays on the Social Situation of Mental Patients and Other Inmates. Garden City, N.Y : Anchor Books, 1961.

Scott, Susie. Total Institutions and Reinvented Identities.
Basingstoke : Palgrave Macmillan, 2011