Successful Societies
by Michèle Lamont

For a few years Weatherhead Center Faculty Associates Michèle Lamont, the Robert I. Goldman Professor of European Studies and Professor of Sociology and African and African American Studies, and Peter Hall, the Krupp Foundation Professor of European Studies, have co-chaired the "Program on Successful Societies" at the Canadian Institute for Advanced Research. With funding from the 2006 Weatherhead Initiative in International Affairs and the National Science Foundation, Lamont has expanded on that research and is the principal investigator of "A Comparative Study of Responses to Discrimination by Members of Stigmatized Groups," which comprises an international multidisciplinary research team analyzing the discursive and behavioral strategies that members of stigmatized groups use to cope with racism and discrimination.

The following text is a summary of Professor Lamont's talk at the Fellows Program welcome dinner on September 11, 2007.

Introduction

In 2003 the Canadian Institute for Advanced Research (CIFAR) asked me to start a project that studies successful societies using a new approach that involved the study of health gradients, which concerns the ways in which inequalities of all types generate inequalities in health outcomes. By pursuing a better understanding of the determinants of societal success, this project aims to provide information that could make public policy more just, efficient, and effective. The Successful Societies project at CIFAR groups epidemiologists with social scientists to try to understand the mechanisms that produced these health gradients. What is a successful society, and how can it be achieved? Many of the scholars who were approached to join the CIFAR research project were initially reluctant to rank societies along a single matrix. What was the principle around which all societies could be ranked? Money? Morality? Religiosity? Certainly societies are too complex to be analyzed in these terms.

In this case it is helpful to recall the Indian legend of the blind men and the elephant—each man touches a different part of the pachyderm and makes a prediction about what the animal looks like. Similarly, the thirteen political scientists, historians, sociologists, social psychologists, philosophers, and legal scholars involved in the Successful Societies project each focus on one aspect of what might make a successful society. Dimensions include income redistribution, effective institutions, decreased intergroup violence, better health outcomes, and more equal distribution of various resources. Together we are aspiring to define a reasonable view of what determines a successful society.

Social Inclusion

The multidimensional research of the Successful Societies project draws on the work of Weatherhead Center Faculty Associate Amartya Sen, the renowned economist and Thomas W. Lamont University Professor, which emphasizes capabilities as opposed to purely economic indexes of development. In contrast to economists, however, we are concerned with how culture, identity, and institutions mediate success. We are particularly concerned with the institutional and cultural conditions that foster a greater sense of social inclusion and recognition. Complementing studies concerned with the role of the law and public policies, we consider how "ordinary" people who are members of stigmatized groups challenge and redefine group boundaries to assert their membership. As a result, one of my interests is in how more porous boundaries are created.

The extent to which societies are inclusive is an important dimension by which we can compare societies from a normative point of view. The criteria by which we should assess these societies should include not only life expectancy and infant mortality but also the extent to which group boundaries are permeable and policed.

For decades social scientists have been very concerned with the impact of culture on inequality. For instance, the cultural explanation of poverty since the 1965 so-called Moynihan Report ("The Negro Family: The Case For National Action") has been strongly associated with "blaming the victim." The report by Daniel Patrick Moynihan pointed out that the single-mother family structure of unskilled, poorly educated, urban working class African Americans had all but disintegrated the fabric of conventional social relationships. So long as this situation persists, the report concluded, the cycle of poverty and disadvantage among African Americans would continue to repeat itself. This view is in contrast to the various structural approaches to the study of poverty that have been favored since. Together with others, I am attempting to refocus debates around meaning-making among low-income populations instead of approaching culture as the property of a group, whether in the form of "the culture of the ghetto" or "the culture of the French."

In the early 1980s, the power of the symbolic reappeared in social analysis at large. What were the cultural repertoires that people would draw on to make sense of the realities that surrounded them? Social scientists became concerned with the cultural "supply side," or those cultural repertoires and materials that people would use to create symbolic boundaries to define "us" and "them," and to explain cross-national variations in this context. This is the background against which my own work emerges.

Symbolic Boundaries

One contextual tool that plays a crucial role in my work is this concept of symbolic boundaries. Going back to the work of Max Weber, we understand that social closure is the process by which groups appeal to distinctive cultural traits or credentials in order to monopolize access to certain resources—for instance, in the way that unions or professional organizations formally protect access to

jobs for their members by appealing to their work experience, special culture, or special credential. It is the same, too, for social exclusion, whereby culture plays a crucial role in establishing group boundaries. Cultural traits are often invoked to justify exclusion, and boundaries are drawn around these traits.

Broadly speaking, my own work concerns both classification systems and cultural schemas that members of various groups utilize to understand their own social position, their status, and their worth in relation to that of other groups. I studied this by drawing on in-depth interviews to analyze how group boundaries are drawn. For instance, I asked members of various class and racial groups how they define similarities and differences between themselves and others with regard to concepts of inferiority and superiority. During the interviews, I tried to document systematically the classification system within which the interviewees located themselves and what criteria grounded their view of what defined a worthy person. As a result of this research I wrote two books. One was on professionals and managers in the United States and France, *Money, Morals, and Manners: The Culture of the French and the American Upper-Middle Class* (1999), which drew on 160 in-depth interviews with randomly sampled professionals and managers and how they defined who was inferior and superior to them. This book was really a dialogue with the work of Pierre Bourdieu (1930–2002), who was an extremely seminal French sociologist. He argued that familiarity with high culture was crucial to the French upper middle class. When I came to the United States after working with Bourdieu and arrived here in 1983, one of his most important books was translated into English in 1984: *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*. American sociologists became very preoccupied with assessing whether the same principle of social exclusion based on high culture was applicable to the United States. My book was an answer to this question: I showed that morality was the primary currency among professionals and managers living in Indianapolis, New York, Paris, and Clermont-Ferrand.

The other book I wrote, *The Dignity of Working Men: Morality and the Boundaries of Race, Class, and Immigration* (2002), was a comparison of white and black workers living in New York and white and North African immigrant workers in Paris. The premise was to look at how workers define who is a worthy person, and the role and importance of money and morality in understanding what defines worth. The interviews I conducted revealed that morality defined a person's value, and is at the center of a person's self-worth. Whereas the ability to live according to one's principles was absolutely crucial for the French upper middle class, the American workers were concerned with "interpersonal morality," or being a responsible and caring spouse and parent.

Dignity of Working Men ended up being about how conceptions of morality and class and racial boundaries

in these two contexts (New York and Paris) are interrelated. The overarching argument of the book, then, was an analysis of the segmentation between "us" and "them" as respondents drew moral, racial, and class boundaries at once. On the one hand, in the United States there are very strong boundaries drawn against blacks and the poor. Immigrants were considered part of "us"; that is, those immigrants "in pursuit of the American dream" were accepted. French society, in contrast, exhibited the exact opposite pattern. The poor were accepted as part of society because Catholicism and socialism continue to feed dominant models of social membership. Furthermore, the French also understood that unfair mechanisms excluded hardworking people from the labor force. Blacks, too, were accepted owing to French Republicanism; French political ideology in general equates Republican universalism as anti-racist and "quintessentially French." On the other hand, North African immigrants in Paris are defined as "them": according to French white workers, North Africans lacked a work ethic, had access to a larger share of the collective wealth than they deserved, and they were uncivilized. Finally, North African immigrants refused to assimilate into French culture, which violates the Republican ideal. This refusal to assimilate is particularly resented, since being French is one of the most high-status aspects of these workers' identity.

One of my favorite aspects of the book was revealed when I interviewed American blacks and French North Africans about what made people equal. These groups knew they were discriminated against and were aware of the kind of racist rhetoric that surrounded them, but they built elaborate narratives about why this racism was unjustified. When I interviewed white American workers about their beliefs concerning what makes various groups of people equal, they had two main responses. First, people are equal because human nature is universal. There are good and bad people in all races. And second, money makes people equal. However, in interviewing African Americans, their responses were much more complex and numerous: beyond money and human nature, they pointed out that humans have a common physiology, and that "we are all children of God," "we all need to work for a living," and "we are all U.S. citizens" and therefore equal.

A Comparative Study of Responses to Discrimination by Members of Stigmatized Groups

My next step was to analyze this question in a much broader context. The Weatherhead Initiative with which I am involved compares de-stigmatization strategies, or everyday anti-racism, across a number of contexts. We chose countries where the boundaries between the dominant and subordinate groups varied in terms of their porousness. The project started as a conference spon-

sored by the Weatherhead Center in 2005, "Ethno-Racism and the Transformation of Collective Identity," which brought together participants who interviewed minorities living in the following mixed cities: Afro-Brazilians in Rio de Janiero, Francophone Québécois in Montreal, Catholics in Belfast, and Palestinians in Tel Aviv. In the case of Quebec, the meaning of the particular collective identity of the Francophone Québécois had changed significantly since the 1960s, when its nationalist movement was ascending and a strong positive collective identity was developing. With regard to Brazil, there is a great deal of interracial marriage, and movement between the racial groups is extremely frequent. Nonetheless, if one compares racial boundaries between blacks and whites—despite the different racial classification systems in Brazil and the United States—in each case there is a different system of racial discrimination, which is mixed with varying combinations of class structures. We now want to understand how ordinary people from the working and middle classes challenge racial boundaries, given differences in the location and intensity of racism across national contexts.

My hope is that an in-depth understanding of everyday anti-racism, although often overlooked in favor of considering institutional or legal processes, will arise from this project.

I believe that anti-racism certainly contributes to creating social change in a significant manner. This agenda, together with the study of other conditions that lead to more successful societies, should keep us busy for quite a few years. ●

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