

Culture and Inequality: A Research Agenda

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This paper provides a general description of my research past agenda while pointing to the ways in which it intersects with the issues that are of interest to participants in this conference, themes such as inequality, work, and exclusion. At the end of my talk, I'll provide some detail on two ongoing projects that deal respectively with African-American anti-racism and with criteria of evaluation of knowledge in the social sciences and the humanities. These will connect with the theme of the conference, "Knowledge, Education, and Future Societies."

Identity and Symbolic boundaries

Much of my work has been concerned with analyzing the constitution of personal and collective identity is its relational dimension. I examine the meaning-making process by which groups create boundaries between "us" and "them", paying particular attention to the criteria of evaluation that are used to define these differences. While social psychologists view the relational process as a universal tendency, as a cultural sociologist, I am more concerned with analyzing how boundary work is accomplished, and more specifically, with identifying the kinds of typification systems, or inferences concerning similarities

and differences, groups mobilize to define who they are. I'll suggest that this leads to new insights in comparative sociology and the sociology of inequality that problematizes variations in definitions of status used across groups. It also leads to new theoretical insights concerning definitions of cultural membership and commensuration processes. These have to do with how are different types of people –whites and blacks, workers and the middle class, immigrants and natives – are constructed as compatible in nature or equivalent or equal to one another.

My approach to the study of categorization has been largely inductive: through in-depth interviews, I have asked individuals to describe the types of people they feel are superior and inferior to them, or similar and different, and how they define worthy people more generally. This approach, which allows me to avoid imposing a-priori definitions of identity onto my subject, is supplemented by the use of survey data, which allows me to identify patterns across groups and to generalize, within limits, about group differences. I also analyze how the meanings given to boundaries vary across races, classes, nations, etc. and how these variations are linked to the supply of cultural tools available to people and to the structural contexts in which they live.

In my earlier book, *Money, Morals, and Manners: the Culture of the French and American Upper-Middle Class* (1992), I was specifically interested in analyzing how professionals and managers define worthy people and how they use these criteria to draw class boundaries. This book documented the relative salience of cultural, socioeconomic, and moral boundaries, and the criteria used to draw these boundaries across contexts (e.g., in France versus the United States, in cultural centers versus cultural peripheries, among social and cultural specialists versus for-profit workers). It provided a grounded

critique of Bourdieu's *Distinction* (1984), by examining the importance of cultural boundaries relative to other types of boundaries and by questioning some of its meta-theoretical assumptions.

My recent book *The Dignity of Working Men* is more ambitious in scope in that it does not focus on class alone: it explores how various criteria are used to draw symbolic boundaries by French and American workers against different groups, particularly racial minorities and immigrants, in addition to the poor and the wealthy. I compare the boundaries drawn by white and black workers in the United States and those drawn by native whites and North African immigrants in France.

Against proponents of familiar post-modern line concerning the fluidity of boundaries, I systematically compare the different types of arguments that groups (e.g., white and black workers in the United States) use to define self and "other." Also, instead of positing that the process of definition of identity is open and fluid, I show that it is tied to the cultural resources workers have access to, and to the conditions in which they live. For instance, I show that French workers are less likely than American workers to define themselves in opposition to the poor in part because socialism, republicanism, and Catholicism put at their disposal a discourse on solidarity and because institutional arrangements such as the quasi-absence of means-tested social benefits makes it less likely that they emphasize the boundary between workers and the poor (p. 237). In other words, I establish empirically that some patterns of self-identification and boundaries are more likely in one context than in another and show that boundary work is framed by the *differentially structured* contexts in which people live.

Comparative Sociology and Collective/National Identity

Another objective of *The Dignity of Working Men* is to offer a multifaceted theory of status that centers on the relationship between various standards of evaluation of the self—for instance, morality and socioeconomic status--within national repertoires. The book shows that racial and class divides are articulated differently across national contexts and that specific groups attach different meanings to the various attributes they use to define their own positioning and that of others in a hierarchy of worth -- instead of positing a consensus about who is “up” and “down” and of flattening cultural differences in evaluation of status (p. 116). Thus, it provides a comparative sociology of group boundaries and of ordinary models of definition of community while offering a dynamic and complex picture the fundamental aspects of inequality. The long-term theoretical stake is to develop a more sophisticated understanding of processes by which cultural membership is defined and equivalencies are established between different categories of people, in line with recent studies of commensuration processes (the work of Espeland and Stevens for instance).

For now, I will briefly sketch what this comparative sociology of group boundaries looks like in the case of French and American workers, how it leads to an analysis of national boundary patterns (as part of processes of definition of national identity), and how my explanation for these patterns differs from traditional culturalist explanations by focusing on the different cultural repertoires available across contexts.

Drawing on 150 in-depth interviews, *The Dignity . . .* shows that in the United States, white workers draw strong boundaries against blacks and the poor on the basis of specific moral criteria having to do with work ethic and self-reliance. Most are indifferent

toward immigrants, or they are accepting of them if they perceive them to be in the pursuit of the American dream. In France, by contrast, white workers define the poor and blacks as “part of us,” using the widely available discourse of class solidarity. They accept these groups, but reject North African immigrants, who, they say, lack civility, violate the principles of republicanism, and are culturally incompatible with the French. Yet, amidst laments concerning the decline of working class culture in France, French workers continue to draw on the language of class struggle to define their relationship with the upper half, whom they view as exploitative and dehumanizing. Even more than American workers, they adopt alternative definitions of success centered on personal integrity and the quality of their interpersonal relationships to locate themselves above, or next to, “people above.” This permits them to guard their own self-worth and dignity, even though most of the men I talked to fare poorly on traditional measures of success.

This study reveals that group boundaries are organized very differently across two national contexts, and that ordinary definitions of cultural membership – of what makes a worthy person—vary as well. These definitions imply distinct views about collective identity – how “us” is different from “them”. They also imply different types of imagined communities and distinct definitions of national identity. For instance, while compared to American workers, French workers downplay material success in their definitions of worth, they also draw boundaries against Americans for their materialism, defining what they view as France’s distinctiveness and sacred values (e.g., solidarity) against Americans’ perceived cold-bloodedness. In the context of accelerated globalization, it will be important to assess whether such national boundary work is being replaced by a cosmopolitan logic that downplays the place of the nation in definitions of collective identity and in new forms

of collective memory. *The Dignity of Working Men* suggests that patterns of boundary work remain localized and highly differentiated across national groups.

The explanatory framework I deploy to account for national patterns of boundary work can be contrasted with the standard framework used to study national cultural differences--the "modal personality" and "national character" frameworks--which stress psychological traits shared by all members of a society. Whereas this approach accounts for cultural orientations by childhood socialization, as indicated above, I account for French and American patterns of boundaries toward blacks, immigrants, the upper half, and the poor by available cultural repertoires (such as a prominent discourse on solidarity) and structural conditions in which workers live (such as the availability of welfare benefits). I understand these patterns of boundary work not as essentialized individual or national characteristics, but as cultural structures, that is, institutionalized cultural repertoires or publicly available categorization systems. This framework can explain intra-national variance that is ignored by culturalist approaches. Indeed, it accounts for patterns of boundaries across groups within a nation, as well as for patterns across nations—for instance, African-Americans draw weaker boundaries toward the poor than white Americans in part because their experience with racism makes them more likely to dissociate moral worth from socio-economic success (p. 144). Also, the mainstream black religious tradition has historically made available to blacks a ready-made discourse about the need for collective solidarity that is less readily available to whites (p. 50). Finally, unlike culturalist approaches, this framework takes into consideration, and can account for, cross-national similarities, such as the weak boundaries that white French workers and African-American workers draw toward the poor.

Rethinking Comparative Cultural Sociology: Politics and Repertoires of Evaluation in France and the United States, the result of a joint projects with the GSPM, complements *The Dignity . . .* in that it provides a comparison of the salience of criteria of evaluation in France and the United States. Here again, the focus is on relatively stable schemas of evaluation that are used in varying proportions across contexts. The analysis draws on eight case studies conducted by eleven French and American researchers who have worked together over a period of four years toward developing systematic comparisons. Together, these case studies reveal that each nation makes more readily available to its members specific sets of tools which means that members of different national communities are not equally likely to draw on the same cultural tools to construct and assess the world that surrounds them. Hence, like *The Dignity . . .*, these case studies show that elements of repertoires are present across geographic units such as nations or regions, but in varying proportions. For instance, the cultural repertoires prevailing in the United States make market references more readily available to Americans, and enable them to resort to such references in a wider range of situations (e.g., the assessment of literary and artistic value, the critique of sexual harassment, the meaning of voluntary activities, and so forth). In contrast, the French repertoires make principles of solidarity more salient and enable a larger number of French people to resort to them across situations, and often precisely in situations in which Americans would resort to market principles (in the elaboration of an anti-racist discourse, the defense of the environment, etc.). However, this does not mean that market criteria of evaluation are absent from the French repertoires, but only that they are used in a small number of situations by a smaller number of people.

Inequality

With the explosive growth of cultural studies since the seventies, considerable attention has also been given to the study of cultural domination and of resistance among subaltern groups. These are also topics to which *The Dignity* . . . contributes by focusing on group differences in standards of evaluation, and on how these shape subjective group boundaries. For instance, it shows that white American workers emphasize moral standards related to “the disciplined self” (e.g., work ethic, perseverance, self-reliance) to distinguish between “people like us” and others: they distance themselves from the upper half, who lack integrity and straightforwardness, and from blacks and “people below,” who are lazy and hold immoral values. Similarly, the moral standards privileged by African Americans, who emphasize “the caring self”, overlap with the criteria they use to evaluate all whites – who are domineering and lack human compassion – and the white upper half in particular --who are exploitative and lack solidarity. Moreover, although each group takes their moral values to be universal, each privileges very different aspects of morality, with regards to which they judge the other group to be deficient. Both groups draw strong boundaries toward the other, but on the basis of very different criteria, with whites being better able to institutionalize their own criteria (“the disciplined self”) as hegemonic.

Many social scientists in France and the United States have written about the declining significance of class as a basis of identity. In contrast, my research suggests that it remains an important basis for collective identity among workers: the book shows that many workers define who they are in opposition to hierarchically defined groups (“people above” and “people below” broadly defined), and that they identify with people

who share similar living conditions (“nothing is easy for people like us”) and similar cultural definitions of “who we are not.” In fact, like the professionals and managers analyzed in *Money, Morals, and Manners*, these working men use a rhetoric of class to talk about differences between “our kind of people” and others. Their definitions of social membership are one of the cultural roots of inequality because, like racial identity, class identity is expressed and tied to the criteria that workers use to evaluate others. The study thus confirms that we should study class-consciousness by focusing not only on taste, on explicit class conflict, or on positions in the system of production. We also need to look at workers’ sense of *worth*, and more broadly at their social identification and group categorization as workers. Hence, the greater radicalism of French workers, as opposed to American workers, is best understood in the context of their wider moral worldview which stresses solidarity, and which plays an important role in making this radicalism possible.

Ongoing Projects

Boundaries and Racism

The Dignity of Working Men also revealed that whites American workers offer fewer evidence of racial equality than of their equality with “people above,” focusing for instance on the fact that money makes people equal. In contrast, African-Americans point to a wider range of evidence to demonstrate racial equality, including the color of blood, our common human destiny, our common origin as children of God, etc. Moreover, the most popular forms of anti-racist discourse found in academia, which center on multiculturalism and cultural relativism), find little resonance among black and

white American working men alike. Instead, these groups more often ground their understanding of racial equality in their everyday experience, epitomized by the notion that there are good and bad people in all races. Finally, the study analyzes how ordinary blacks represent whites and understand racial differences: blacks challenge dominant white representations of blacks as morally lacking when they emphasize their own greater generosity and caring. Hence, the research informs our understanding of the cultural frameworks through which minority and majority groups alike understand restricted and open definitions of cultural membership.

The Dignity also contributes to the sociology of racism by analyzing it in the context of individuals' broad moral worldviews and bringing to light their inner logic through comparative lenses. For instance, the study shows that the concern white workers have for providing for their families helps us understand the centrality of self-reliance in the boundaries they draw against blacks. It also documents inductively which norms the majority group perceives the minority group to violate (e.g., traditional morality, but not straightforwardness), and thus, complements the literature on symbolic racism, which posits that the majority group rejects blacks because they are viewed as not respecting ideal American values such as individualism.

I am now pursuing my study of anti-racist strategies by analyzing, first of all, the range of repertoires that blacks in the United States use to demonstrate to themselves and to others that they are equal to whites. More specifically, I ask: what do blacks identify as common denominators across races? In other words, what principles do they use to ground the similarity, commonality, or compatibility of races? Drawing on the writings of Bruno Latour on how to make facts "resistant", I examine precisely what kinds of

evidence or “proofs” blacks point to, to demonstrate that these principles hold up. I get at this question by asking interviewees if they believe that whites and blacks are equal and why, and what they view as the main differences and similarities between the two groups. I also ask them whether they share something essential with other blacks and what are their commonalities.

I am also interested in analyzing whether the anti-racism of interviewees posits particularism or universalism. I get at this by asking them whether it is natural to “help your own kind”, whether they believe that blacks should help black people first, and how they understand the relationship between racial and human solidarity. This is to assess who is included within the community of reference toward which they express solidarity (blacks only, humanity as a whole, or other categories such as “American”). I also ask them whether they believe that racism is part of human nature (for blacks and whites) with the goal again of testing the limit of their commitment to universalism. Finally, I explore whether the criteria of cultural membership within American mainstream society they use is particularistic, i.e., available mostly to specific subsets of the population – consumption or college education for the middle class for instance-- or available to all.

My focus here and elsewhere is phenomenological since I center my attention on the criteria that underlie the comparative evaluations of groups. Instead of focusing on racism or anti-racism *per se*, I begin with a general sociology of processes of classification and ordering and with how interviewees provide evidence that things or people go together. This sociology of classification involves focusing on ordinary thinking about what constitutes heterogeneity and similarity within and between groups.

My earlier work on African-American workers showed that this group is likely to use a wide range of strategies to demonstrate their equality to whites, which includes again, pointing to their common characteristics as “children of God”, to their common physiology, or to the universality of human nature. I am now conducted interviews with members of the national African-American elites –black Americans who have been very successful by mainstream standards—to compare their anti-racists strategies with those of ordinary black workers. I find that similar diversity of arguments is found in the two groups. I have talked with people such as the poet Nikki Giovanni, Congresswoman Eleanor Holmes Norton, and Chancellor Julius Chamber and found that they describe their prime anti-racist strategy in terms of demonstrating their intelligence and competence, which involves showing that racist stereotypes do not apply to them and/or that they are unfounded, and that they personally (and/or blacks more generally) can outperform whites. In a nutshell, this group establishes its cultural membership (or racial equality) by giving evidence of conformity with norms of American individualism, particularly concerning education, competence, and upward mobility. They also provide a very ambiguous message concerning the possibility that all blacks, rich and poor, be given cultural membership, given that they often offer proof of their own worthiness by pointing to their education, competence, and economic success.

Criteria of Evaluation of knowledge

Another research project that I am currently conducting analyzes the categories and criteria used by scholars when they evaluate research proposals in the social sciences and the humanities, based on observations of peer review panels and interviews with

panelists. The study asks: How is the boundary between more and less worthy proposals constructed? What categories of evaluation are used? How is evidence of quality provided? What kind of evidence is provided? How does “blackboxing”, to use Latour’s concept, works in this case? How is the fact of high quality scholarship established and made resistant. This project analyzes the customary rules to evaluate excellence in the context of funding panels, and scripts of excellence and how they vary across the disciplines. The study has already generated a number of interesting findings. For instance, we found that when defining originality, panelists move far beyond the traditional focus on new theory and new method that is stressed by the canonical literature on peer review. Instead, they emphasize the art of asking new questions and using novel approach. We also find that even in the social sciences, a non-reductivist epistemological position remains far more popular than scienticism. This project is a direct extension of my earlier work on definitions of worth across class: it examines academia as a social sphere where definitions of worth compete. It approaches our epistemological conflicts as an object of sociological analysis and refuses to take the native’s perspective. As such, it can feed directly into our collective reflection about the kind of research that is most conducive to greater social justice.

Challenges and Future Questions

Although the contributions described above speak to a range of substantive issues, they nevertheless converge around the fundamental social processes involved in the construction of commonalties and differences. The drawing and bridging of racial, national, and class boundaries and their relationship with definitions of identity and the self, are at the center of my research agenda, and they revolve around whether and how

individuals think of “us” as similar, equivalent, commensurate, or compatible, with “them.” Perhaps the added value of these contributions is to be found less in specific theoretical propositions than in their pointing to ways of capturing old problems through different lenses –which I hope will have become apparent to the reader.

Several new challenges emerge from this research agenda. For now, I’ll mention only two: 1) More work is needed on collective definitions of cultural membership as locus for “identity work” which does not require that individuals be connected through networks and engage in face-to-face contacts. Such boundary work can operate either at the level of bounded subcultures, or at the level of widely-shared cultural structures, of “hidden codes that make individuals and groups predictable and dependable social actors,” (Melucci 1996, p. 8) that exist beyond the enactment of specific interpersonal ties.

More work is needed on the bridging of boundaries across group. In particular, we know very little about how individuals produce universalism and promote forms of cosmopolitanism in different settings --at work, in the public sphere, in neighborhoods, in kinship networks, etc. We need to study the extent to which professionals and workers consider it natural to first help “their own kind” and how they reconcile meritocratic norms in the workplace with clientelistic practices (Lamont 2000c). While in recent years, political philosophers have given considerable attention to questions of community boundaries, by discussing tribalism (Barber 1995), patriotism/cosmopolitanism (Nussbaum 1994, 1996), and particularism/universalism (Walzer 1997), much work needs to be done before we can understand how ordinary citizens conceptualize these questions, as well as widely-shared, institutionalized views on these crucial issues. This

is a problem toward which I plan to turn myself in the next five years, in the context of a new major initiative on the study of “Successful Societies” that was launched by the Canadian Institute for Advanced Research, and which I head with Peter Hall. I will be examining how members of various low-status group think about equalization and the bridging of group boundaries, with the hope of producing a sociological response to the more philosophical literature on the limits to equality.