

Culture of poverty and Social Resilience

An interview with Michele Lamont

Nicolas DUVOUX, Elise TENRET, Nadège VEZINAT

In this interview, Michele Lamont explains different facets of her intellectual work. She comments on the cultural sociology she practices and on her urge to both understand how individuals make their lives meaningful and how to make sociology meaningful.

Books & Ideas: What kind of resources cultural and social structures provide to disadvantaged populations?

Michele Lamont: In 2003, I was asked by the Canadian Institute for Advanced Studies to start a new project called *Successful Societies* with Peter Hall who is a political scientist also at Harvard. This organization creates interdisciplinary research teams and they asked us to choose a number of people who could have complementary perspectives to help us define this object which did not exist. We were to define an empirical object called successful societies. So after much deliberation, we decided to start with what we thought was the least ethnocentric definition of successful societies we could think of which are health related: low-infant mortality, high life expectancy. And we wanted to bring an analysis of the conditions that lead to these outcomes that were to be a lot more multidimensional than what we usually find, less focused on the individuals, more focused on the buffers that groups have access to. So we were interested both in institutional buffers, the kind of resources that a strong welfare state gives for example but also the cultural buffers having to do with the structures that are put in place to provide cultural membership to a larger part of the population. The contributions to our first book include for instance Ann Swidler's paper on the role of chiefs in Africa in the struggle against AIDS, the role that chiefs play in mobilizing groups to find solutions to collective problems. The second book that is coming out of the project is "*Social*

resilience in the age of neoliberalism". Here again, we were looking at resources that groups have at their disposal to deal with the challenges that they face. And the responses are those tools, again both institutional and cultural. We study this by drawing on a range of expertise that is represented in our group in which you find a geographer, his name is Jim Dunn (McMaster University) and he has a wonderful paper on housing and stigma. His chapter argues that, for people who live in public housing projects, their sense of ontological security (to borrow Giddens' concept) is sustained or enabled by the kind of structures in which they live. I am really interested in these questions of institutional and cultural enabling and constraining and how you put people and individuals and groups in contexts that open and close possibilities for them – not only possibilities for action but also possibilities for construction of identities that are more or less resilient, multidimensional, that provide people with images of possible futures and possible selves, where they can be more or less empowered and able to shape their lives.

To connect this to other projects, I have been leading a study of responses to stigmatization, working together with African-American students at Harvard since 2006. We became involved in a large project for which we interviewed working class and middle class African-Americans living in New Jersey and we are interested in how they responded to stigma. If you are black, living in the US, everyday, in your interactions with non-blacks, you face the questions: what are their expectations concerning who I am, what I am able to do, what are the little slights that I am going to experience, how will I navigate them? Do I get upset? Do I challenge them? Do I go along? If I am a bank teller, do I simply try to do my job and not pay attention to the conflictual interracial relationships? I have just finished a paper where we develop the idea of "management of the self." This is based on accounts by our respondents of how they negotiate the stigma, what they do to avoid conforming the stereotypes about the angry blacks, but also how they decide to spend their energy, when it is worth challenging. We know about the racial disparities in mental health and if you spend your life challenging, you are going to spend your day being angry, the level of stress is unbelievable. Plus, if you are a lawyer, you do not necessarily want your racial identity to be always salient, you also want to be able to do your job and be a good lawyer and perhaps have your professional identity be more salient in your everyday interactions.

I am very passionate about this project because I feel that in terms of innovation, we are really pursuing systematically questions that have not been analysed very much in the

literature. On the one hand, we have data because we have 150 interviews that have been meticulously coded. We are able to empirically identify the full range of responses that respondents give, not only the ideal responses (what is the best way to cope with racism in general) but also to very specific incident that they describe, and what they tell their kids about how to deal with racism. We have a whole bunch of questions that allow us to chart this terrain. Some sociologists have worked on this before, like Joe Feagin who shows that blacks respond to racism. But we raise the bar in terms of the data we have and the detail of the analysis we can do. What is more interesting is that this project was built in parallel with similar projects in Brazil (160 interviews conducted with our collaborators there) and 150 interviews in Israel with three groups that are stigmatized very differently: Ethiopians who are black but who are also Jewish; Mizrahis, the Oriental Jews, who represent fifty percent of the population but are discriminated against and concentrated at the bottom of the labour market, and the Arab Israelis who as Arabs are very stigmatized too but who are also citizens.¹ We have a special issue of the journal *Racial and Ethnic Studies* forthcoming that compares systematically the responses we find in these three places. In the US, the predominant response is to confront. You have no choice but to confront racism. Everyone knows that the history of the US is a history of racism and the civil rights movement has empowered blacks to fight back. At the same time there are many situational considerations that will constrain when and where and how you respond in public places, in the work place. In the work place the risk of responding is of course much higher so we are able to chart this terrain.

In Israel, there are three different responses depending on the group you are part of. My collaborators found that in most cases Ethiopian Jews tried to downplay race. They say “We are immigrants, just like Russian immigrants and the Zionist narrative tells us that one day we will be like any other Jewish person in Israel, full citizens.” They really are not in the same position as blacks in the US. Mizrahis basically do the same thing, they do not talk a lot about discrimination, they much more assert their membership in the Zionist community. And the Arab Israelis are not reacting by taking a protesting position. Instead they simply claim the right to be respected as human beings, in the name of dignity. They do not even talk about human rights very much except for the middle class respondents. They mobilize their friends who are Jewish to defend them.

¹ See http://www.wcfia.harvard.edu/weatherhead_initiative/07_discrimination/projectse

This contrasts with the Brazil case where interviewees evoke racial mixture. Their response when they are victims of racism would be to say: well, who do you think you are to tell me this? Who is your grandmother? What colour is your grandmother? That is to say we are all blacks. This is a response that you simply do not find in the US. Our project documents the contrast in the repertoires of answers that we find in each context and what feeds this repertoire. We have a paper which looks at the repertoires of African-Americans and how it is fed not only by the national myths about what the US is about (the fact that we acknowledge the history of slavery), but also by neoliberalism and by the collective identity of blacks as resilient people, people who have always fought and survived – the formation of this distinctive identity as a repertoire of response. They say: “We might be victim of your racism but we are strong and we have value because we have more moral than you white people who are domineering, etc.”

I am thinking about this project as an attempt to study cultural structures and to map them. The reason why we have large samples is not because we think they are nationally representative samples, they are not. But they are large enough so that we can capture the full range of arguments that are present in one specific population. We are in fact documenting the cultural structures that are part of the universe in which we function and that enables and constraints paths for action, collective imaginaries. It is part of the *Successful Societies Program* (see <http://www2.cifar.ca/research/successful-societies-program/>) which is very much concerned with collective imaginaries as a dimension of social lives that needs to be systematically understood. It is part of what we could describe as a fairly ambitious program that is shared by many cultural sociologists, to understand also the relations between cultural structures and social structures and our symbolic boundaries which structure the segmentation of society, how we imagine the similarities and differences that are feeding into spatial and social segregation, and to try to move toward a more multidimensional understanding of inequality – not only inequality but also sociability – who interacts with whom and how. I think these are the questions that are really moving this project.

Books & Ideas: How do you see the culture-of-poverty debate in France and in the US?

Michele Lamont: It was very interesting in September when I arrived in France to spend a year here to see the publication of the book by Hugues Lagrange, *Le déni des cultures*, which

was quickly followed by responses by Didier and Eric Fassin, and by several other responses. What all this debate was about was whether Lagrange was using a culturalist argument that found the source of deviance among the young people with African origins living in the Paris suburbs, poor people concentrated in “ghettos,” whether the higher levels of criminality in these groups could be explained by their origins. The book was pushing a hot button. It brought to the forefront a whole range of objections that are very much surface level not only in academia but in the population as a whole. I was told that this is the book in social sciences that has sold most since World War II. It must be an exaggeration but it is a huge seller anyway. I do not want to discuss here the content of the book as Lagrange and I are to have a dialogue organized by La Vie des Idées in April), but I just want to mention the parallels between the debates here and the previous debates in the US.

In the US, you had the publications of my colleague William Julius Wilson that had been attacked by Steven Steinberg. His criticisms were not only about Wilson’s work but also the Moynihan Report, Oscar Lewis’ argument about the culture of poverty, etc. The terms of the debate were somewhat similar to what we are finding here in France. But it gets to the question: is it possible to talk about the role of culture in the reproduction of inequality in a way that is not inherently conservative and blaming the victim. In the *Annals* issue that I copublished with Mario L. Small and David Harding we tried to say: that debate is from the 1960’s. Since then, for forty years, we have had an enormous amount of conceptual and empirical research trying to ask the question differently, by looking at what the frames through which low income populations understand their futures, their conditions for mobility are, what kind of narratives they develop to explain their position, how they understand the structural constraints, etc. We believe it is now possible to mobilize these tools that are at our disposal to talk about causality, and not only causality but also to better understand the phenomenon that we are trying to account for: what are the frames through which low income populations understand their lives, explain their lives. We were very proud of ourselves because we did very systematic discussion of the literature. Mario Small and I had published a previous version of the paper in 2008 that was much more detailed,² so when the *Annals* issue came out, there was a Congressional briefing and the goal was to take the policy makers and to shake them: “Listen, there is all this new scholarship that is now available. Please take it into consideration, you can not presume that the daddy that does not give money to support

² http://www.wjh.harvard.edu/soc/faculty/lamont/publications/Lamont-and-Small_How-Culture-Matters.pdf

his children is a moral failure”. We know thanks to the work of Maureen Waller on non-residential that low-income fathers do a lot to support their children.³ Their emotional role, their presence is crucial to understanding their contribution, so you need to use the tools of cultural sociology to have good policies to try to improve the lives of their children. The *Annals* issue was covered by the American Sociological Association and had a lot of echoes. We have seen Steve Steinberg in the *Boston Review* criticized our work, repeating the criticisms he had already addressed to Bill Wilson thirty years ago. And he mostly criticized us for not doing what he would have done, to study structural causes of inequality. We don’t deny their importance. It’s simply not the topic of our issue.

Our goal was to define a third position. To say, “it is not culture or structure.” We should not oppose progressive structural analysis to allegedly inherently conservative discussion of identity or culture. It is possible to draw on conceptual tools such as *identity, narrative, institutions, habitus, cultural capital, symbolic boundaries* to provide a much more empirically specific nuanced, complex, detailed understanding of the cultural world in which the poor operate and of course we believe very strongly that it is possible to do so without engaging in the kind of conservative politics that Steinberg links with culture. What is at stake is different ways of framing the problem. I am very hopeful that the last forty years of scholarship will not simply be ignored, that there are different ways of asking the question. Most importantly people need to read what we did to try to understand for themselves what difference it makes. It is so easy when you work on questions that are as touchy as this one to appeal to political correctness in developing criticisms. It is not a service to scholarship.

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³ Maureen Waller (2002). *My Baby’s Father: Unmarried Parents and Paternal Responsibility*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press