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SYMPOSIUM: MICHELE LAMONT'S *SEEING OTHERS*

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Sociologists as change agents? Thoughts on Lamont's *Seeing Others*

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ABSTRACT

This essay argues that Lamont's *Seeing Others* constitutes both an example of, and call for, public sociology. Overviewing Lamont's approach to change agents and recognition chains, I question what role sociologists can play as change agents. This involves both a brief historical overview of Du Bois' approach to recognition and social research, before putting forward some methodological questions about how to instigate an "ordinary humanism" in one's research practice.

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Seeing others and the capacity to live with difference

In 1993, Hall (1993, 361) prophesized that "the capacity to live with difference is […] the coming question of the twenty-first century". Now more than thirty years on, Hall's comment seems to be prescient as ever: refugees are left to die as they attempt to cross the British channel because they aren't seen as desirable citizens (Day and McBean 2022), trans people are stigmatized in public spaces while political and media discourse claim they are threatening the mores of sexuality and gender (Murib 2020; Smith 2022), and where I am based – in the UK – those calling for a recognition of Palestinian rights are lambasted by the Prime Minister as a "violent and intimidatory" mob hellbent on threatening democracy. If anything, these examples demonstrate that for the most part, we have *not* developed the capacity to live with difference in the twenty-first century.

It is in this context that Lamont's (2023) *Seeing Others* comes into the picture. Lamont's (2023) book is at once an intellectual sociological intervention, a well-crafted call for public sociology, *and* a political call for action as we try to attain a

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more equitable world. At the heart of Lamont's (2023, 4) book is the argument that – simply put – "dignity affects quality of life just as much as material resources do". Importantly, Lamont does not ignore the material poverty and exploitation rife in structural relations, but instead uses the tools of cultural sociology to demonstrate how various "change agents" and "recognition chains" can contribute towards redefined schemes of worth and recognition in the contemporary social order. Re-defining such worthiness, Lamont (2023, 12) argues, can actually *ameliorate material inequalities* in the way that it will celebrate "the plurality of our paths" and value "people for their identities and differences – not in spite of them". Coming back to Hall's remark from 1992, Lamont's book thus attempts to pinpoint how we might collectively develop our capacity to not just live with difference, but to celebrate difference and make it the foundation of new modes of social organization.

Before proceeding to discuss the book in detail, I want to reiterate my interpretation of *Seeing Others* as being a call for public sociology. A central argument of Lamont's book is that in order to understand inequality, we need to understand the dominant scripts of self (or narratives) that shape how we define worth and recognition. However, as Lamont points out, dominant media and political discourse about inequality tends to shun sociological arguments in favour of explanations developed in psychology and economics. This has created a lacuna of public understandings of inequality that pay attention to the "more intangible, collective, cultural dimension of worth" that psychologists and economists "both frequently overlook" (Lamont 2023, 3–4). This lack of a "sociological imagination" in media, policy, and public spheres consequently popularizes incomplete visions of inequality and the social world. For instance, Lamont points out that it is not uncommon to encounter psychological theories of tribalism in media and political spheres, where it is contended that a "human nature" hardwires humans to look inwards towards their natural groups; by contrast, Lamont (2023, 58) points out that, for instance:

> […] there is nothing natural about "seeing race," even in babies and toddlers – like everything else, racial categories have to be taught. These perceptions are changeable and can be acted upon. We have the ability to reimagine the future and what kind of society we want to live in. How we go about changing these boundaries and ensuring that all groups feel valued is at the center of Seeing Others".

I therefore call *Seeing Others* as a call for public sociology because – among its many achievements – it makes the case for the necessity of enlivening the sociological imagination throughout civil society.[1]

An overview of the argument

Of course, *Seeing Others* is not just a call for public sociology, but a fine example of public sociology itself in the way that it succinctly conveys the

power of cultural sociology to academic and non-academic audiences alike. *Seeing Others* derives not only from 180 interviews with various "change agents", but also draws upon Lamont's previous forty years of research – including her comparative work on moral boundaries (Lamont 1992; 2000) and recognition projects (Lamont et al. 2016). Lamont (2023, 3) professes that her previous research in cultural sociology provides "insights can help us combat narrow and hateful conceptions of who matters, and find ways of encouraging a more expansive means of understanding people's worth".

Indeed, discussing how we can combat and rewrite "narrow and hateful conceptions of who matters" is the central crux of Lamont's book. Lamont's (2023, 9) argument is that various "change agents" wield the ability to shape such schemas of worth and recognition, thus playing "an important role in shaping how we see one another". These change agents include a wide array of people and professions – in *Seeing Others*, the 180 change agents interviewed range from TV producers and journalists through to academics, activists, and artists. Lamont (2023, 77) argues that change agents often constitute forms of recognition chains, whereby:

> […] a network of change agents and organizations that scales up and disseminates messages of recognition. In these chains, change agents join forces with foundations and other organizations to benefit from their infrastructure, and ultimately to see their recognition work reverberate far beyond their own individual or institutional reach.

Some of the examples Lamont uses to clarify the concept of change agents and recognition chains will be familiar to many readers. For instance, Lamont discusses the screenwriter Ava DuVernay as a change agent who worked with Netflix to disseminate narratives about race, racism, and worthiness through documentaries such as "The 13th" (which looks into the prison industrial complex). Likewise, Lamont (2023, 1) notes journalist Nikole Hannah-Jones' 1619 project, where she works with the New York Times to disseminate narratives about "the value and dignity of Black people's experiences".

Importantly, however, Lamont (2023, 93) emphasizes that change agents and recognition chains "operate on the right as much as they do on the left", and that "throughout history, some change agents have aligned themselves with immoral causes". Lamont (2023, 63) thus makes sure to remind us of how certain change agents are concerned with "stigmatization […] which, instead of calling attention to the value of differences, casts them as a mark of inferiority". To clarify this with an example, Lamont (2023, 10) encourages us to "think of popular commentators such as Tucker Carlson, Joe Rogan, and Ben Shapiro, who so often use their platforms to deny certain groups recognition and to restrict who is considered worthy". While Lamont's book deliberately does not focus too much on these stigmatization-agents, she does not

refer to them to demonstrate the point that in a time where the increasing stigmatization of minoritized people is becoming the political norm (Mondon and Winter 2020), we need recognition projects more than ever.

Change agents in social science: a Du Boisian note

While I enjoyed the book as a whole, I am particularly interested in developing a further conversation about change agents. In particular, I am interested in the role that social scientists can play as change agents.

Of course, one could convincingly argue that since sociology has been around, sociologists have acted as change agents. Consider the Du Boisian approach, for example. Part of the reason why Du Bois was so interested in empirical sociology was because of his frustration with nineteenth and early twentieth century scholars' misrepresentations of Black life (see Meghji 2023a). In *The Study of Negro Problems*, Du Bois (1898, 10) thus argues that:

> As things are, our opinions upon the Negro are more matters of faith than of knowledge. Every schoolboy is ready to discuss the matter, and there are few men that have not settled convictions. Such a situation is dangerous. Whenever any nation allows impulse, whim or hasty conjecture to usurp the place of conscious, normative, intelligent action, it is in grave danger. The sole aim of any society is to settle its problems in accordance with its highest ideals, and the only rational method of accomplishing this is to study those problems *in the light of the best scientific research*. (emphasis added)

Social scientific research, Du Bois (1898) consequently argued, could play a key role in not just understanding the social problems faced by Black Americans, but could also play a role in (to use Lamont's language) *recognizing* and *valuing* them. Du Bois (1898, 13–14) contrasts his own plea for scientific research against his confirmation bias-seeking colleagues, who elsewhere he dismisses as "car-window" sociologists ([1899]1967), claiming that:

> It is so easy for a man who has already formed his conclusions to receive any and all testimony in their favor without carefully weighing and testing, it, that we sometimes find in serious scientific studies very curious proof of broad conclusions.

The distinctive bias in his contemporaries' work, Du Bois (1898, 14–15) argued, meant that "their testimony, however interesting as opinion, must of necessity be worthless as science". Du Bois' approach – of centreing recognition and valuation towards Black Americans through the scientific practice of social research – went on to influence the tradition of critical Black sociology. Speaking at Du Bois' testimonial dinner, Frazier (1951, 3–4), for instance, commented that:

> […] for three hundred years the white world but more especially white America had taught and broadcast to the world and had attempted through slavery and terror to make the Negro believe that he was intellectually and morally inferior to other races […] Du Bois […] marshalled all the available scientific knowledge to expose the falsity of the current teaching concerning the inferiority of the Negro. While the so-called social scientists were diplomatically avoiding the truth and rationalising American prejudices, Du Bois insisted upon publishing scientific truth in spite of the dominant prejudices.

Furthermore, Du Bois extended out this recognition-based sociological project far beyond the geographical confines of the United States. In his *The World and Africa* ([1947]2007), as well as *Black folk: then and now* ([1939]2007), Du Bois rejects the European myth of the lack of African civilization by charting the development of African societies and the diaspora from the pre-colonial era to his present day. A year after Du Bois' death, in 1964 St Clair Drake ([1964]1986, 127) praised these two books for their contributions of recognition and valuation towards the African continent, arguing that in a context where "many Negroes were rejecting enforced identification with the unsavory stereotypes of Africa which existed during the Nineteenth Century, Du Bois took quite a different task. He identified with Africa". Indeed, a similar point about Du Bois' oeuvre was noted by none other than Martin Luther King Jr (1968), where he noted that Du Bois' ([1935]2014) *Black Reconstruction* was the first book to tell the story of American (and global) modernity through the lens of Black agency and insurgency, thus challenging white historians' myths of racial inferiority. Just like with his work on Black America, Du Bois' interest in the African continent inspired a wave of other American social scientists to document the histories, civilizations, and transformative power of the Black diaspora – this canon includes pieces such as Frazier's (1951) *Race and Culture Contacts in the Modern World*, and Drake's (1991) *Black Folk here and there*.[2]

Even beyond Du Bois, in contemporary social science many of us are working on engaging in excluded traditions of sociological thought as a means of stretching out (epistemic) valuation and recognition.[3] This body of work has involved excavating social theories from geopolitical spaces and standpoints which have been excluded from the sociological canon, including the work of professional sociologists (Alatas and Sinha 2017; Boatcă and Costa 2010; Connell 2007; Meghji 2020) as well as highlighting the sociological thinking taking place through anti-racist and anti-colonial struggles that can enrich professional sociology (Go 2023; Meghji 2024; Patel 2023). Underlying this research agenda is a belief that cognitive justice is connected to material justice, and that by recognizing and valuing alternative standpoints in sociology, we can work towards a better understanding of the complexities of the social universe.

In sum, therefore, there seems to be a very strong case that sociologists (and social scientists more broadly) can play a role as change agents, and, indeed, that we ought to embrace this role. However, the matter becomes slightly more complicated when it comes to discussing what duty sociologists have towards extending out recognition and valuation to those social groups with whom we may have significant disagreements and alternate viewpoints. Lamont (2023) for example, discusses Hochschild's (2016) *Strangers in Their Own Land* – a study which examines how many white Southerners feel as though they are the newly stigmatized group in American society, and who often turn towards right-wing nationalism in a bid to redress this state of affairs.[4] Lamont (2023) points out that political figures like Trump attempted to build recognition chains (built, for example, on the stigmatization of migrants) in an attempt to incorporate such "left behinds" into civil society, demonstrating again the existence of right-wing change agents and recognition projects.

My interest here is on discussing what duty the sociologist has here when researching groups – such as these white Southerners – who are propagating worldviews which as so drastically at odds with the researcher themselves. As sociologists, we know there is a considerable body of qualitative and quantitative evidence that demonstrates how many whites across the Western world see themselves as the "new racial victims" who are, in some extreme discourses, portrayed as being on the threat of extinction (Lamont, Park, and Ayala-Hurtado 2017; Sengul 2022; Song 2014).

From reading Lamont's book, I think that we have potentially two complementary answers to this problem of social research. Firstly, one could argue that it is possible to study an opposing social group without legitimating their claims, and indeed that social research here is essential for understanding why and how people's (sometimes despicable) dispositions get formed in the first place – indeed, one could say that this is merely the practice of good sociological research (Duneier 2011). Here, the social scientific study of groups with violent or racist views is not based on a liberal premise that all views matter equally, but instead is aimed towards understanding how we might change their scripts of self towards more equitable directions. Indeed, such justice-oriented sociological research could help develop what Lamont (2023, 144) terms as an "ordinary humanism", which emphasizes "what we all have in common as people, what makes us similar or compatible". Sociological researchers of white victimhood, for instance, could work with white folks to demonstrate how many of their complaints (e.g. of non-recognition, economic disenfranchisement, and social isolation) are connected to the experiences of others whom they stigmatize – emphasizing this ordinary humanism here might encourage such whites to adopt different scripts of self.

Thinking of sociologists and social scientists as change agents, who may research groups with violent or stigmatizing views, I am thoroughly interested to hear more about the practical advice Lamont has on how we can implement this ordinary humanism in our research practices. Does it require a turn towards more participatory research methods (Fahlberg 2023)? Does it require sociologists to work more closely with foundations and organizations to build more robust recognition chains? Does it require us to concentrate more efforts on publishing in public avenues rather than University presses?

Conclusion

Towards the beginning of Lamont's (2023, 8) book, she comments that "if we aim to truly recognize all groups, we have to question negative portrayals or stigmas. We also have to change how we evaluate people and stress what is common, as well as what is different". While it is easy to be pessimistic about the future of our social world, the successive pages of Lamont's book document numerous examples of how recognition and valuation *have* been extended to previously stigmatized groups: through media, art, television, and scientific research. All the examples that Lamont (2023, 157) overviews demonstrate her claim that "we engineer our world together by mobilizing narratives that expand recognition about who is worthy […] A more inclusive society is within our reach, but making it a reality means being the change we envision for our world". Lamont's (2023, 156) optimism is not just based on future-oriented hopes, but also is grounded in memories of historical activism; as she notes:

> While millennials and Gen Z are often dismissive of boomers, they are walking in the footsteps of a generation that led the Civil Rights Movement and the second-wave feminist movement, the effects of which are still being felt to this day. Even if younger generations are dissatisfied with what they perceive as their elders' complacency about the destruction of the environment, I can think of many political points of intergenerational convergence that can be built upon and expanded further.

I am sure that many of us will benefit from the insights of Lamont's book, which stresses that while an equitable world may be difficult to attain, it is by no means impossible – importantly, recognition might just have a crucial role to play in this worldmaking.

Notes

1. This is not to say that any sociological imagination is completely absent from the social polity (see Meghji 2024). Rather, it is to say that sociological interpretations are often left out of dominant spheres of influence.
2. Deliberately titled similarly to Du Bois' ([1939] 2007) *Black folk: then and now*.

3. Indeed, the resurgent interest in Du Bois is part of this overall movement (see Itzigsohn and Brown 2020; Meghji 2023b).
4. The extent to which Hochschild engages with race critical theory can be called into question (see Meghji 2022a, 2022b).

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