

Publications

Comparative Cultural Sociology and the Study of Europe

by Michelle Lamont

One of the age-old challenges faced by American sociologists working on Europe is that of defining their disciplinary identities and their identities as European experts in compatible ways. This is perhaps because making "general theoretical contributions," independently of the objects of study, remains the main coinage within the discipline of sociology. The resulting tensions can be alleviated by broadening the definition of what it means to be a "Europeanist" in the context of American social science. Doing so may help to bring back into European Studies the large number of sociologists who study Europe or European countries without defining themselves as Europeanists. Recent developments in cultural sociology represent one of several venues available for this project.

The institutionalization of cultural categories is one topic that has attracted enormous interest across a range of disciplines over the past two decades. In particular, moving beyond the familiar terrains of cultural history and cultural anthropology, comparativists in political science have become interested in examining how identities and ideas shape political outcomes and definitions of interests (Ross 1997). Among sociologists, neo-institutionalists have focused on the international standardization of the Western notion of personhood through the diffusion of rights and through the expansion of science and education (e.g., Thomas, Meyer, Ramirez, and Boli, eds. 1987). The sociological study of "cultural models" and "cultural idioms" has also played an important role in the dynamic fields of comparative race, ethnicity, immigration and citizenship.

While these recent literatures focus on macro-institutional and political levels, new strands of research are concerned with supra-individual and non-state centered grammars of cultural positions made cognitively available across nations. In particular, two lines of work have converged in their programmatic emphasis on the importance of analyzing the relationship between different criteria of evaluation. In the United States, drawing on the late Durkheimian tradition, cultural sociologists have focused on repertoires and on the content of symbolic boundaries, that is, group boundaries that demarcate the limits of groups —or outsiders from insiders, who share common values or common definitions of the sacred, of stigma, or of exclusion. 1 Within this growing literature, I have analyzed the plurality of criteria of evaluation that individuals use, and I have shown (contra Bourdieu) that criteria of evaluation (e.g., "solidarity", morality, and economic success) vary across time and space for various classes and racial groups (Lamont 1992, 2000). In France, Boltanski and Thévenot (1991, 1999) have analyzed orders of justification that people deploy to assess whether an action benefits the common good. They distinguish a plurality of "grammars of worth," in which each kind of worth is a way to raise persons and things to "common-ness." Building on these two lines of work, eight recent case studies have focused on repertoires of evaluation in France and the United States (Lamont and Thévenot 2000). These case studies bear on topics as varied as the value of contemporary art, the legitimacy of interests in environmental conflicts, and whether racial groups are morally equal. Each shows, by analyzing the criteria of evaluation, that elementary grammars or schemas vary across nations. 2 Hence, they move toward a more structured understanding of the context in which individuals define in-group and out-

group, allowing us to develop a more sophisticated approach to the concept of context, which often remains a black box in the social science literature.

We find that each nation makes more readily available to its members specific sets of tools, which means that members of different communities do not give the same symbolic weight to particular distinctions. For instance, poverty and blackness are less salient as bases of exclusion in France than in the United States, due to the convergence of a series of structural and cultural factors, including distinct social policies and widely-shared notions of solidarity that have been made available by the socialist and labor traditions in France (Lamont 2000). Another difference is that 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 wide range of situations, whereas the French repertoires make principles of civic 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. This does not mean that market criteria of evaluation are absent in France, but only that they are used more rarely there than they are in the United States.

By using theoretical tools developed by cultural sociologists over the last twenty years, including those of cultural tool-kits and cultural structures (Swidler 1986; Sewell 1992), we move beyond the psychologism, naturalism, and essentialism that characterized much of the comparative cultural analysis tradition, from Alexis de Tocqueville and Ferdinand Toennies to Talcott Parsons, Francis Fukiyama and Samuel Huntington. Whereas generalizations concerning national differences are always dangerous because they are bound to lead one to overlook intra-national variation and the specificity of structured contexts in which people use principles of evaluation, our focus on the distribution of cultural repertoires across groups allows us to avoid these pitfalls. 3 Finally, whereas the civic culture literature posits a dualism between culture/collectivity on the one hand and behavioral/individual characteristics on the other, this recent literature approaches culture as both collective and individualistic and focuses on clusters of inter-subjective orientations and systems of meaning rooted in social practices and/or shared understandings.

This focus on cultural repertoires is echoed in a growing American and European comparative literature that points to the salience of institutionalized meaning in a range of non-state centered contexts. To give only a few examples, Glaeser (2000) analyzes how identification processes at work among former police officers of West Germany and the former East Germany draw on distinct tools available in the environment; Engelstad (1997) studies how seniority and "need" criteria shape decision-making concerning layoffs in Germany and Norway; Saguy (forthcoming) examines institutionalized definitions of sexual harassment in France and the United States; and Fourcade-Gourinchas (2000) analyzes how economic expertise is constructed and evaluated in Great Britain, France, and the United States.

Although those who contribute to this new literature often do not define themselves as Europeanists, they have much to contribute to our understanding of the non-state dimensions of national differences, particularly in the European context. Indeed, because these and other studies approach cultural repertoires as structural and constraining features of societies, they move beyond the structure/culture divide that characterized European Studies in the sixties and seventies, and that continues to frame an

overly simple, yet widely used, definition of the field (in a nutshell, "political economy vs. Huntington"). American and European sociologists who do not think of themselves as Europeanists would also benefit from greater cross-fertilization, if only because it would lead them away from a sometimes persisting parochialism and because comparativism can provide them with new, unforeseen, theoretical problems. Hence, these broadenings could lead to a more attractive, because more dynamic, field of European Studies.

Notes

1 To simplify greatly, one can describe the differences between American cultural sociology on the one hand, and work associated with cultural studies and/or the linguistic turn on the other, as follows: 1) the former is less exclusively concerned with questions of domination and resistance than the latter; 2) it is less exclusively textual (i.e., is more concerned with locating meanings within broader structural and cultural contexts); 3) it focuses on explanation as well as interpretation; and 4) it more often draws on systematic data collection, as opposed to anecdotal evidence.

2 National cultural repertoires are also defined as "cultural environment(s) and the material contained therein (. . .) the socially constructed, readily available cultural materials of a society--the archetypes, the myths, the epigrams and adages, the morals, the means-end chains, the evaluation criteria, the categorization schemas, all of the materials of shared 'tool-kits.'" (Corse 1997, p. 156).

3 Like many American symbolic anthropologists (e.g., Gupta and Ferguson 1997) we are concerned with analyzing the process by which the world comes to be understood as being made of societies with different cultures.

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