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A second opinion: diagnosis and prescription of the American case

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Commentary for Lamont M. 2019 "From 'having' to 'being': self-worth and the current crisis of American society" for British Journal of Sociology DOI: 10.1111/1468-4446.12667]

I am honored to join the discussion of Michelle Lamont's presentation. Lamont, like other noteworthy Francophone observers before her, has done much over the years to illuminate the sociological curiosity that is American society. "From Having to Being" is a thought-provoking description of and prescription for a society that is being battered by strong and regressive political and economic shocks.

Lamont and I agree on the broad story: The United States has in the last 40 or so years experienced growing economic inequality fostered by and, in turn, fostering an increasingly powerful politics hostile to government, favorable to the wealthy, and aggressively infused with pro-market ideology. These developments have injured most Americans. Nations under the influence of the United States have undergone similar changes although most western societies have avoided the worst (not Britain, alas).

Despite such broad agreement, my role here is to raise issues with Lamont's analysis in hopes of widening our shared understanding. I explore her "diagnosis" of our condition and then only briefly turn to her "prescription." In the first regard, diagnosis, I critique three of Lamont's empirical claims: that neoliberalism has fostered ethnic hostility; that it has accentuated materialist impulses; and that it has increased angst particularly among the upper middle class. These empirical explorations lead to modifying Lamont's account in two ways: (a) More forces have been at work than just economic reordering; and (b) the economic reordering is important because it created insecurity rather than because it changed the culture. Caveat: I, unlike Lamont, am qualified only to discuss the American case (Fischer 2010).

Diagnosis

Lamont argues that "neoliberalism"—roughly, market-oriented institutions and thought—is "narrowing definitions of [individual] worth" and thus "feed[ing] a mental health crisis in the upper middle class" and leading average people to "embrace" impossible-to-achieve "standards of worth," with the further consequence of "deepen[ing] the stigmatization of low-income populations" and "groups often stereotypically associated with poverty...."—i.e., ethnic minorities (see pp. [c. p. 27 in draft]).

Stigmatization of Minorities. First, the least complex empirical question: Is the rise of neoliberalism associated with greater hostility toward minorities? No. Americans' attitudes and behaviors toward minorities have *improved* in recent decades. For example, in the 1970s, 19 percent of white respondents to the American General Social Survey (GSS) said that they would vote against a "qualified" black nominated by their own party for president; in the 2000s, only 4 percent did.¹ Whites became less likely to endorse invidious explanations of black-white achievement differences.² As to immigrants, a 2018 Gallup Poll report headlined "Record-High 75% of Americans Say Immigration Is Good Thing" notes that "a record-low number of Americans—29%—[say] that immigration into the U.S. should be decreased" (Brenan 2018). These are, of course, only words and may mask true "racial resentment." Turn, then, to other indicators.

Lamont makes much of cultural markers. In recent decades, blacks have been increasingly represented at the peaks of celebrity status—for example, as Oscar award winners for cinema, as Emmy award winners for

¹ Own analysis of the GSS data, here and below.

² These are the RACDIF1-4 questions in the GSS. Whites became less likely to endorse *any* explanation, including discrimination, although "lack of will" remained the most popular. The "thermometer" questions Lamont graphed are not persuasive. For one, the changes are minor and easily understood as resulting from Republican backlash to Obama. For another, if the trends were rooted in neoliberalism, the negative trend should have started many years earlier.

television, and as quarterbacks, the premier and “intellectual” position in professional American football.³ Blacks have increasingly become American role models. The deepest indicator of stigma is a barrier to intermarriage. Yet, black-white intermarriage rates have soared in recent decades, across all age groups, as have rates of native-born whites marrying native-born minorities and the foreign-born (Pew Research Center 2017; Qian and Lichter 2011). Indeed, blacks’ improvement on some social indicators masks general working-class deterioration.⁴

Yet, if racism is in decline, how can one explain Trump? Trump’s *victory* was basically an accident—the collision of explicit appeals to white nationalism, Russian meddling, FBI clumsiness, and a weird electoral system. Trump’s unexpected *popularity* underlines my point: Far better than other Republicans had, Trump mobilized Americans who felt culturally threatened and they felt threatened in great measure precisely by the cultural rise of minorities (and women).⁵

³ Oscars: In the 1970s, nonwhites made up 4 percent of the nominees and zero percent of the winners of the major awards for film performers, but between 2000 and 2015, they comprised about 15% of both—calculated from data reported here: <http://labs.time.com/story/oscars-diversity/>. Emmys: Calculated from the male and female best actors in comedy and drama listed in Wikipedia, at https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_black_Primetime_Emy_Award_winners_and_nominees. Football: Freedman (2014).

⁴ E.g., happiness (Blanchflower and Oswald 2017, fig. 4) and mortality (Case and Deaton 2017).

⁵ By now, many studies have documented that Trump’s core voters were

Valorizing Individual Economic Attainment. The deepest damage done by neoliberalism for Lamont is its rewriting of the “scripts of the self [to] emphasize material success, social status, competitiveness, and the privatization of risk (or self-reliance)” (p. 10 in draft]). Two empirical and one explanatory question arise: Has emphasis on material success increased? Has emphasis on self-reliance increased? And, if they have, are they due to a rising neoliberalism or something else?

Observers have for centuries described Americans as notably materialistic and acquisitive. “The desire to acquire the good things of this world is the dominant passion among Americans. . . . Americans cleave to the things of this world as if assured that they will never die,” wrote Tocqueville in the 1830s. Any change over the generations has probably been toward somewhat *less* materialism (see review in Fischer, 2010, Ch. 3). Indeed, there is an entire school of thought that sees the era since the 1960s as one of “post-materialism” (e.g., Inglehart and Welzel 2005).

Lamont’s evidence on changes in American materialism since neoliberalism is mostly cross-sectional. Some survey data do suggest

suffered not from economic distress but *cultural* distress—racism, but also fear of liberated women, educated elites, and urban dwellers. I review some of the literature in two blog posts:

<https://wordpress.com/post/madeinamericathebook.wordpress.com/5330> and
<https://wordpress.com/post/madeinamericathebook.wordpress.com/6020>.

increases in valuing financial success among youth⁶ and the wider public, although the trend may reflect both the unusual character of the 1960s and fluctuations in economic stresses—notably 1970s stagflation and the Great Recession (Fischer, 2010, pp. 90ff). Other data are mixed. For example, Lamont writes about materialist distortions of the American Dream. Surveys conducted in 1986 of the general population and in 2015 of young adults asked what they thought the “American Dream” meant. *Least* popular each year was “to be able to become wealthy,” it was especially *unpopular* among the 2015 young.⁷ Evidence of a connection between neoliberalism’s ascendance and average Americans’ materialism is mixed.

American emphasis on self-reliant individualism runs yet deeper. Belief in the “sovereign” freely choosing self—both as a description of human nature

⁶ Lamont leans on the UCLA survey of American Freshman (Egan, et al., 2018). One of their indicators of materialism, whether “being very well financially off” was a very important life objective, did show major increases from the 1960s to 2010s, from about 40 to about 80 percent agreeing (while, for example, “helping others” stayed level from about 65 to about 70 percent; pp. 83ff). Another indicator, however, preferring a business major rose rapidly from the 1960s to the 1980s and then dropped back to roughly its 1960s level by the 2010s (pp. 20ff; seeking biological or health majors, and being undecided have risen a lot).

⁷ iPoll archives (<https://ropercenter.cornell.edu/CFIDE/cf/action/home/index.cfm>): Polls USROPER.86DRM.R11A and USSRS.120115F.R02F. Most popular in 1986 were a high school education, freedom of choice, and owning a home; most popular for the young in 2015 were starting one’s own business, sending children to college, and freedom of choice.

and as a norm for human action—has been seen as fundamental from before Tocqueville to now (and noted by many observers). Despite the global reach of American culture, Americans even today remain in this way distinctive—for example, in asserting that people determine their own fates, especially, their own economic fates, that the poor are poor because they do not try and the rich are rich because they work hard (e.g., Fischer 2008; Alesina, Stantcheva, and Teso, 2018, fig. 7).

In recent generations, more Americans have claimed for themselves the independence presumed by the ideology of self-reliance (Fischer 2010; Shamma, 2002). Those who were not white male propertied heads of households slowly gained what Early Americans called “competency” or “virtue,” the material and legal independence which allows people to be self-determining, self-creating, and indeed self-reliant (Vickers, 1990). One example of such gains is the rise since the 19th century of married women’s rights—rights to property, to affection, to divorce, and to children after divorce. Another example is the growing independence of the young and the aged in, for example, being able to live alone. And of course, the history of blacks in America is another example. With the democratization of power came a democratization of “self-fashioning”—conscious work on self-improvement. Has post-1960s neoliberalism accelerated these trends? Perhaps. The research Lamont cites on growing “self-perfectionism” among college students (Curran and Hill 2017) would be consistent.

More specifically, has neoliberalism amplified the power and popularity of individualistic explanations of economic fortunes? To be sure, some American policies toward the poor since the 1970s seemed punitive—the 1996 welfare reform act, imposition in some places of drug-testing for receiving assistance, and the like. Yet, most evidence suggests that Americans have *not* increasingly bought into the market ideology. In the last 40-plus years, surveyed Americans have steadily or even increasingly reported that inequality is growing and that America is dividing into haves and have-nots, seen it as *not* necessary for prosperity but instead as a boon to the “rich and powerful,” and have said that they wanted something done about it.⁸ Similarly, Americans’ attitudes toward the poor and assistance to the poor, although harsher than those of other westerners, have changed little in several decades, perhaps in a liberal direction.⁹

⁸McCall (2013); this blog post:

<https://wordpress.com/post/madeinamericathebook.wordpress.com/3996> . Lamont cites Mijs (2018) showing growing acceptance of the idea that “people get ahead by hard work” (rather than by luck or help from others)—the GSS item “GETAHEAD.” That is only one item. Another GSS item shows a small increase in those who say that one needs to “know the right people” to get ahead (OPKNOW) and no change in the need to come from a “wealthy family” to get ahead (OPWLTH). Over the range of GSS questions over the last 40 years, there is no general move toward libertarian interpretations and maybe the opposite.

⁹ For example, Pew found a 5-point increase between 2014 and 2018 in attributing wealth to hard work. But L.A. Times polls found a 7-point decrease between 1985 and 1995 in labeling most poor people as lazy (items in the iPoll archives).

In sum, my reading of the data is that the “sovereign self” understanding of society has long been a distinctive part of American culture and supportive of “free market” economic ideology. And its hold has spread over the course of American history. Yet, there is not much evidence to believe that the recent rise of market policies and ideologies themselves have substantially shifted the general public’s views.

Upper-Middle-Class Angst. Lamont’s argument here is that the upper middle class (UMC) has distinctively suffered because of neoliberal culture; it demands too much of its members and they demand too much of themselves. Alternatively, I would agree that growing economic inequality and insecurity have pained almost everyone; and concede that the hollowing-out of middle class jobs together with the extension of the highest reaches of the class pyramid have raised the stakes—and the stress—for the UMC; and yet nonetheless argue that this class still suffers less, increasingly less, than does the working class. Lamont diagnoses the problem as cultural change, to which the UMC as particularly vulnerable. Alternatively, the problem is material change, to which the working class is particularly vulnerable.

In support of her argument, Lamont cites reports of growing stress among college students, presumably because they are UMC. But of course

many, probably the most stressed, students are not (yet) UMC. Lamont also cites a study of rates of depression between 2005 and 2015 (Weinberger et al 2018). But, while most income groups in this very large national survey showed small elevations, the poorest group worsened more than did the richest.¹⁰ An online 2018 survey of stress found, as did the just-cited depression study, the highest rates among the young. What younger respondents were especially likely to report as stressors were overwhelmingly material concerns: work, money, debt, and health (American Psychological Association 2018, pp. 5-9). Similarly, differences between classes (or between the college graduates and others as a proxy for class) have widened, not narrowed, in: family stability, labor force participation, alcohol consumption, happiness, optimism, and mortality.¹¹ The UMC has not

¹⁰ Calculations from the Weinberger et al (2018) supplement: The upward slope for the poorest was .152 percentage points per year and for the richest, .088 (the base rates being inversely associated with income). The only educational category to show an increase were those with “some college”—which may include many youth. The only large changes occurred among young people (answers indicating depression rising from 8 or 9 percent up to 11 to 13 percent for teens, a smaller increase for young adults), women, and whites.

¹¹ Family: class differences have widened in divorce and children living without two parents (F-H paper; Rakin and Gibson-Davis 2018). Men’s labor force participation: Kreuger (2017, fig. 5) . Alcohol: problem drinking in the early 2000s: Grant et al (2017). Happiness: Blanchflower and Oswald (2017). Optimism: Lamont cites a study (p. 13, n 25; p. 25) showing a growing difference by education in confidence that people can achieve the American Dream. Mortality: Case and Deaton (2017) have revised their analysis of “despair mortality” among the white working class since their original paper garnered much criticism. In their latest analysis (Case and Deaton, 2017, fig. 7), there is a clear class divergence in such

been more psychologically wounded by neoliberalism than the working class.

Such data, then, turn our attention from a cultural dynamic, the spread of neoliberal ideology, to a material one, the falling behind economically (and, as a consequence, socially¹²) of large segments of the working class.

Speaking to the broader diagnosis that Lamont provides, evidence suggests two overarching conclusions: (1) Not everything is about economics. The weakening of racial barriers and the rising status of minorities in America is a distinctive story. Another, related story is the democratization of “competency.” Others besides propertied white men have become independent. (2) When economics *is* a driving factor—and it certainly is critical—it is because of economic (in)security more than economic culture or ideology (Fischer 2010, Ch. 2).

Notes on “Prescription”

Lamont recommends moves toward a culture in which, to borrow from Martin Luther King, Jr., people would be judged not by the size of their wallets, “but by the content of their character.” Many attainments would be just as valued as economic success, attainments that could be reached by mortality rates.

¹² I allude to the literature on growing social disengagement among the lower working class, especially men.

all-like friendship, civic virtue—and that would help de-stigmatize the stigmatized. These are worthy goals. But I raise two general questions.

One: To what extent have Americans already been moving, over the *longue duree*, in this direction? I noted earlier the evidence on the de-stigmatization of minorities. As to de-valorizing wealth, compare the rigid status hierarchies described in early-twentieth-century community studies such as *Yankee City*, *Jonesville*, and *Caste & Class in a Southern Town* to the jeans-wearing, informalization of contemporary American culture.

Two: Can we insure that other standards of evaluation besides the economic do not become just as competitive, oppressive, and stressful? There's the "most popular girl" competition familiar in American high schools and the "most pious" competition in some religious communities. Consider the furious reactions of some Americans to what they took to be Hilary Clinton's description of them as "deplorables" and to Barak Obama's description of them as "bitter . . . cling[ing] to guns or religion or antipathy toward people who aren't like them or anti-immigrant sentiment or anti-trade sentiment as a way to explain their frustrations." Indeed, "class" resentment not of money snobbery but of other snobberies—education, cultural tastes, cosmopolitanism—also fuels the Trump movement. Can invidious distinctions be avoided?

Closing

Lamont has provided a valuable view of current crisis in western societies. I agree that the triumph of free-market partisans and the defeat of labor since about 1980 has both riven our societies and poisoned civic life. We disagree only, in the American case, at least, on the relative weight to give to the cultural versus the material dynamics in these changes.

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