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Reflections inspired by *Ethnic Boundary Making: Institutions, Power, Networks* by Andreas Wimmer

Michèle Lamont

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This essay engages with Wimmer's *Ethnic Boundary Making* to consider how cultural processes feed into inequality. It describes the strengths of the book, relates it to my early work, and draws on Lamont, Beljean, and Clair (forthcoming), to describe two types of identification processes (racialization and stigmatization) and two types of rationalization processes (standardization and evaluation) that contribute to an understanding of the relationship between symbolic and social boundaries. It stresses similarities and differences between approaches and suggests possible points for convergence.

Keywords: boundary making; classification; social process; inequality; misrecognition; evaluation

Ethnic Boundary Making: Institutions, Power, Networks (Wimmer 2013) has the makings of a classic. The author takes on a vast and important topic, provides a bold and ambitious theoretical agenda, and engages in theory development by convincingly confronting his hypotheses with data of various kinds. As he goes along, he explains the implications of his findings for a wide range of theories and debates in sociology and beyond, and thus demonstrates the significance of these findings. The result is impressive because of Wimmer's mastery of American and European literature from various fields, his encyclopedic knowledge of ethnic group composition and differentiation from around the globe, and his ability to use new statistical techniques to establish empirical patterns of group cohesion, differentiation and boundary work.

One of the many theoretical contributions of the book is its presentation (in chapter three) of a broad typology of boundary changes, which appears to apply to all configurations possible. This is followed by another more elaborate typological analysis in chapter four that discusses the conditions that help us predict boundary work (with a focus on the institutions, power and networks singled out in the title of the book). The theoretical generativity of the analysis, and its wide applicability to fundamental sociological questions, are simply remarkable.

Wimmer's focus on the making of groupness (and more specifically, ethno-national groupness) shares much with my own work on boundaries and classification, from its insistence on not predefining the categories through which individuals self-identify. Indeed, this is precisely the inductive approach that I used in *Money, Morals and Manners* (Lamont 1992) and *The Dignity of Working Men* (Lamont 2000), where I asked professionals, managers and workers to produce boundary work in the context of interviews – that is, to describe who they feel similar and different from, inferior and superior, and so on – so as to tap where they draw lines and what criteria they use to draw such lines. The conclusion of *Money, Morals and Manners* opened up the question

of the relationship between symbolic and social boundaries (the former being defined as a necessary but insufficient condition for the latter). This insight was further elaborated in Lamont and Molnár (2002: 169), where we pointed to similarities in boundary processes ‘across a wide range of social phenomena, institutions and locations’ such as social and collective identity, class, ethnic/racial and gender/sexual inequality, professions, science and knowledge and community, national identities and spatial boundaries. We also called for a more general sociology of the properties and mechanisms of boundary processes, including how these are more fluid, policed, crossable, movable, and so on. In the late 1990s and early 2000s, scholars interested in ethnicity, nationality and race converged in their interests around such questions, with milestone articles such as Zolberg and Woon (1999), Brubaker and Cooper (2000), Brubaker, Loveman, and Stamatov (2004), and Alba (2005) (plus, of course, Wimmer 2004, which makes up the bulk of chapter five in the book). A convergence of focus on the work of Bourdieu on classification struggle and the legacy of Fredrik Barth empowered this shift. Wimmer’s book builds on this budding tradition and extends our understanding of boundary changes in significant ways. At the present juncture, I find his book particularly useful as a tool for thinking more systematically and comparatively about groupness and responses to stigmatization by blacks and other groups in the USA, Brazil and Israel, and the effects of responses on group boundaries – a topic that I have been pursuing since 2006 in collaboration with a group of Brazilian, American and Israeli sociologists (for more information, see Lamont and Mizrahi 2012). Instead of finding fault in a work with which I am largely in agreement, I take this opportunity to initiate a dialogue between Wimmer’s perspective and my own recent efforts to contribute to a sociology of inequality that is focused on fundamental cultural processes grounded in classification and the production of group boundaries – processes that I have been studying through my work on evaluation (Lamont 2009, 2012) and stigmatization (e.g. Lamont, Welburn, and Fleming 2013).

In a paper written jointly by myself, Stefan Beljean and Matthew Clair, we provide a framework for understanding the ways in which specific types of fundamental processes produce social inequality (Lamont, Beljean, and Clair *forthcoming*). Specifically, we focus on cultural processes that have received limited attention in the literature. We argue that much of the literature on inequality has focused on the actions of dominant actors and institutions in gaining access to material and non-material resources, or on how ecological effects cause unequal access to material resources. In contrast, we highlight identification and rationalization as fundamental types of micro-cultural processes feeding into inequality and we describe four significant analytical exemplars of these two types: racialization and stigmatization (for identification) and standardization and evaluation (for rationalization). These processes all involve classification and the production of symbolic and social boundaries – the production of groupness of sort, including the types of groups that Wimmer is concerned with: ethnicity, but also racial and national groupings. While space limitation prevents a full explication of our argument, we provide a few key elements and point to convergence and divergence with Wimmer’s approach.

First, as compared to social processes that concern control over material resources, cultural processes are centrally constituted at the level of meaning making: they take shape around the creation of shared categories or classification systems through which individuals perceive and make sense of their environment.¹ They all involve a sorting out of people, actions or environments that requires the creation of group boundaries and the creation and relative stabilization of hierarchies, objectively and intersubjectively. These

boundaries and hierarchies are typically a collective accomplishment that requires *de facto* the use of shared conventions and the coordination of action between various actors and institutions. Thus, cultural processes are not necessarily oriented towards ultimate instrumental goals such as gaining resources or exercising power. Instead, they are primarily shared frameworks that are constitutive of reality, as documented by cognitive sociology (e.g. DiMaggio 1997) and by the recent literature on semiotic practices (Sewell 2005). While our analysis emphasizes the symbolic aspects of these processes, the conclusion of *Ethnic Boundary Making* reveals that Wimmer (2013, 208) is more of a social structuralist, ultimately interested in power and *Realpolitik*, as his analysis forefronts strategies as they are shaped by 'institutional incentives, ... positions in hierarchies of economic, political and symbolic power, and existing social networks'. In contrast, our approach is more inductive throughout, including concern for the variable frames that guide human actions (as elaborated in Lamont 2009).

Second, while much of the literature on inequality is concerned with the distribution of material resources (income inequality in particular), cultural process concerns the distribution of both material and non-material resources *as well as* recognition. The dual focus on the distribution of resources and recognition is crucial because we understand inequality as operating at the level of the distribution of legitimacy as much as the distribution of material and social resources. Recognition is central in establishing groups as worthy and valued members of the community, as individuals endowed with full cultural membership (Taylor 1992; Honneth 2012). This is particularly crucial in dynamic struggles around the meanings associated with individual and collective social identity (Jenkins 2008). While identity and identification figure centrally in Wimmer's argument, he does not give the quest for recognition its due as a motivation for human action or a dimension of inequality. He acknowledges that a multiplicity of motivations feeds the creation of group boundaries (Wimmer 2013, 5), but he does not delve into how group formation is dependent on the quest for cultural citizenship and dignity, especially in the face of racialization and stigmatization. This is one aspect where our approach diverges from and complements his. Considering such questions can illuminate Wimmer's analysis of the dynamics of boundary change described in his chapter three.

Third, in our paper, cultural processes do not solely depend on the actions of dominant actors: subordinates often participate in the elaboration of cultural processes as much as dominant agents do, and the sorting can be described as an unintended consequence of their (intentionally or not) coordinated action. Thus, the intention of the dominant is not a necessary condition for producing these outcomes as it is the case in traditional approaches to inequality that focus on the monopolization of material and non-material resources by dominant parties. One could ask Wimmer to more systematically spell out the interaction of dominant and dominated parties in the creation of group boundaries – the extent to which their coordination may or may not lead to symbolic or social boundaries (tied to the distribution of resources). While one finds illustrations throughout the book, Wimmer does not explicitly theorize this question or, more broadly, the issue of coordination of action between groups.

Finally, our paper shows that the fundamental cultural processes that concern us operate continuously and in a routine fashion. Individuals do not aim to consciously deploy one system of symbolic boundaries over another, as they are rarely conscious that they inhabit categorization systems. Instead, they tend to use schemas that are largely taken for granted and made available by the national cultural repertoires that surround

them (Lamont and Thévenot 2000). Thus, while considering cultural processes, we move from a focus on discrete, instrumental actions aimed at monopolizing material and non-material resources, to a focus on a range of ongoing, routine relationships that enable and constrain social action (Giddens 1984; Sewell 1992). In this way, our approach resembles the ecological effects literature, which considers processes to be durable and self-replicating. Yet, we understand these cultural processes to be the result of the actions of individual and group actors and the systems of meaning in which they operate, as opposed to the outcome of a diffuse ecological environment. In this way again, our approach is slightly at odds with Wimmer's in that we systematically consider whether and how such processes may feed into inequality, while considering this outcome as open-ended and indefinite.

To recap, we conceptualize cultural processes as ongoing actions/practices that feed into structures (organizations, institutions) to produce various types of outcomes, including inequality, in a process akin to that described by structuration theorists (cf. Giddens 1984). These processes shape everyday interactions and result in an array of consequences that may feed into distribution and recognition. Through processes such as racialization, stigmatization, standardization and evaluation, individuals sort and are sorted out on an ongoing basis. These processes open and close opportunities, and enable and constrain individuals' life-course trajectories. The outcomes of such processes are open-ended or uncertain, as opposed to *always* resulting in exploitation, exclusion or isolation.

Such observations need to be more systematically situated in relation to Wimmer's approach to the making and unmaking of group boundaries, so as to contribute to our understanding of the causes of inequality. Wimmer is deeply influenced by Bourdieu, and is concerned with the institutionalization (and non-institutionalization) of collective identity. Yet, despite his sustained interest in the study of mechanisms (he claims an affiliation with analytical sociology), one is left with the impression that he has yet to fully develop an analysis of fundamental cultural processes operating at the micro level – and this, despite having his intellectual roots in the field of anthropology. This is another point of divergence. However, much more could also be said on the points of convergence between our approaches, and this would require more space than we have here. But I can mention one such point: the role of institutions in mediating the creation of inequality. For example, even in the 1990s, eligibility in the mortgage lending industry depended on apparently neutral rationalized evaluative practices that led to unequal access to resources for African Americans. Similarly, there are many other institutions that allocate resources based on taken-for-granted rules that depend on the activation of 'neutral' classification systems, but which systematically privilege some groups over others. It is the case for access to higher education in American colleges (Lemann 2000; Karabel 2005) and the determination of salaries for working mothers (on the motherhood penalty, see Budig and England 2001). Along the same line, social scientists have shown how the recent increase in wealth inequality in the USA has resulted from small, but incremental political-legal changes (Hacker and Pierson 2010) and staggering 'performance base' increases in executive compensation that advantage the rich. While these studies concern *distribution* as a dimension of inequality, a parallel analysis needs to be conducted on how institutions feed *misrecognition* (through stigmatization and racialization). At a time when a growing number of social scientists aim to better understand the relationship between symbolic and social boundaries, it has become imperative to

examine such questions, so as to be able to develop an approach to such issues that matches Wimmer's book in sophistication. Much of his work shows us the way and invites us to build on his many insights. This attempt to create a dialogue between *Ethnic Boundary Making* and Lamont, Beljean, and Clair ([forthcoming](#)) should be only one step in this direction.

Note

1. Tilly (1998)'s *Durable Inequality* has done much to bring to light the role that categorization processes play in the production of inequality. As we have noted, categorization is central to the cultural processes that we identify as missing in the literature on inequality. While Tilly's (1998: 10) work explicates how exploitation and opportunity hoarding 'establish systems of categorical inequality' both intentionally and unintentionally (through emulation and adaptation), our approach envisions a systematic explication of the way in which group classifications are negotiated intersubjectively by dominants as well as subordinates. Moreover, we argue for an analytic approach that specifies how *specific types* of classificatory processes employ categorization at the meso level.

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