

Prisms of Inequality:

Moral Boundaries, Exclusion and Academic Evaluation

Michèle Lamont
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*Moral Boundaries,
Exclusion and
Academic Evaluation*

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The Erasmus Prize is awarded annually to a person or institution that has made an exceptional contribution to the humanities, the social sciences or the arts, in Europe and beyond. Emphasizing the importance of tolerance, cultural pluriformity and non-dogmatic critical thinking, the Foundation endeavours to express these values in the choice of its laureates.

In 2017 the board of the Erasmus Prize decided to pay tribute to the combined theme of *Knowledge, power and diversity*. Erasmus, after whom the prize was named, was deeply interested in these three significant categories. Cultural sociologist Michèle Lamont was chosen to receive the prize for her devoted contribution to the social sciences in general and for her research into the relationship between knowledge, power and diversity in particular.

In this eleventh volume in the series of Praemium Erasmianum Essays, Lamont gives an overview of her interests and oeuvre, thus making her views on inequality and diversity accessible to a larger audience. It yields a fascinating demonstration of the wide scope and importance of her discipline.

Ernst Hirsch Ballin

Chairman Praemium Erasmianum Foundation

That the Erasmus Prize Foundation chose to recognize research on ‘Power, Knowledge, and Diversity’ is a momentous decision given the daunting challenges faced by advanced industrial societies at the present time: inequality in wealth has now reached its most extreme point since the Great Depression of 1929, fostering harsher social relations that negatively affect collective wellbeing. Social solidarity is challenged by neoliberal tenets – the privatization of risk and market fundamentalism – that demand that those with fewest resources demonstrate moral character through self-reliance, competitiveness, and economic success. These criteria of worth are frequently applied even to those who cannot possibly measure up. This leads the poor and many immigrant and ethno-religious minority communities to experience increased stigmatization on a daily basis. In my own specialized sphere, the world of the university, faculty members are submitted to an intensified regime of evaluation of all scholarly activities through proliferating rankings that emphasize productivity. This essay purports to make sense of these interconnected transformations that impact inequality through distribution of resources and recognition of identity, by examining inequality through the prisms of *moral boundaries*, *exclusion*, and *academic evaluation*. I engage in an autobiographic reflection of my scholarly approach to these topics, which I regard as privileged sites of observation from which to consider contests over definitions of worth and their effect on inequality.

Part 1 explores the relationship between *moral boundaries* in the making of inequality. Symbolic boundaries take many forms, including the moral distinctions we make between types of people. They exercise a powerful influence on residential segregation, patterns of intermarriage across classes and ethnic groups, and networks that affect access to resources – (e.g., good jobs, good schools, social capital, and safety). Examining moral boundaries is essential if we are to gain a

better understanding of social inclusion and recognition. I describe recent changes taking place under neoliberalism and argue that maintaining a *diversity of criteria* for defining a worthy life is essential for collective wellbeing. This can result in a better life not only for stigmatized groups, but for all: everyone gains when a society broadens cultural membership to the largest number, as this results in a decline in criminality, political disengagement, radicalization and anomie.

Part 2 tackles how environments enable and constrain different experiences of, and responses to, the *exclusion* that results when moral boundaries are drawn in such a way that groups of people are denied respect. I describe findings from my most recent study, the coauthored book *Getting Respect: Responding to Stigma and Discrimination in the United States, Brazil and Israel*, which concerns African Americans, Black Brazilians, and three stigmatized groups in Israel (Arab Palestinian citizens as well as Ethiopian and Mizrahi Jews).² I describe various conditions that affect how groups respond to exclusion, and discuss implications for understanding inequality and how to broaden cultural membership.

Part 3 examines specific processes used to evaluate individuals and how they influence evaluative outcomes. This part opens the black box of *academic evaluation* with the goal of forging new paths in our understanding of the production of worth. I revisit my book *How Professors Think: Inside the Curious World of Academic Judgment*, which concerns United States-based evaluations of excellence in the social sciences and humanities in particular.³ I discuss the conditions that sustain this culture of evaluation and provide elements for an analysis of cultural processes and their impact on inequality. Understanding how evaluation cultures work, and how these relate to the drawing of symbolic boundaries, is crucial to recognize the mechanisms through which inequality and social exclusion are produced.

Several themes connect the three sections of this essay. One theme is how definitions of worth are central to the creation

of inequality. Another is the role of morality in determining the worth and in responding to exclusion (by demonstrating moral virtue for instance). How societies and institutions value certain types of moral selves matter enormously for inequality, and yet these scripts are rarely factored into current studies aiming to make sense of the growing socio-economic gap. A third theme is that a healthy society makes available a multiplicity of criteria through which to assess worth, so that fewer view themselves and are viewed as ‘losers’: we all gain by promoting a multidimensional conception of worth, and by extending cultural membership to the largest number.

It is crucial to reflect on worth and its impact on inequality in this time of uncertainty, when a hardening of boundaries and divisions appears to be pulling advanced industrial societies further apart. Just as the welfare state is weakened, competition for resources increases, social solidarity faces growing challenges and communities seem to be turning inward. In such moments, fear of the other becomes more prominent and immigrants and other symbolic outsiders easily become scapegoats. As inequality increases, these societies are adopting narrow (economic) definitions of success that are only reachable by the upper-middle class, the top twenty percent, which sets the majority on the path of disaffection and failure. This is untenable in the long term, which is why it is urgent to better understand the contradictory social forces that affect how boundaries, social and symbolic, are drawn and hardened. What will make the social whole cohere in the future is a burning question and one that I invite the reader to consider. The many challenges of the current moment require that we collectively figure out how to be our better selves, if we are to leave our children a world they will want to live in. Whether this is possible remains to be seen.

As a French-speaking Canadian, I moved to Paris at the tender age of twenty and became a student of the late French sociologist of culture, Pierre Bourdieu, who was already emerging as one of the giants of late-twentieth-century social sciences. This was an extraordinary experience, for those were exceptional times in the Parisian intellectual world. I was attending his seminar the year that his classical book *Distinction* came out (1979).⁴ This publication was revolutionary because it moved the class struggle from the domain of political economy to that of everyday life, and from the realm of production to the realms of consumption, expressive culture, and identity formation. *Distinction* revealed how middle- and upper-middle-class cultural sophistication and distinction (attributes of many progressive intellectuals) were lynchpins of interclass domination, a form of ‘symbolic violence’ understood as a counterpart to the (Marxist) emphasis on economic alienation. This book turned the world upside down, and contributed to giving the semiotic (or meaning-making) aspects of social life pride of place in several disciplines (history, sociology and anthropology, in particular) in the following decades. Unlike major strands of Marxism that dominated many scholarly conversations in the seventies, Bourdieu’s analysis suggested that economic aspects of social life are not necessarily the dominant factor in shaping inequality.

A second move brought me to Northern California. There, as a post-doc, I proceeded to ascertain whether Bourdieu’s theory held in the American context. My intuition was that by emphasizing the value that the upper-middle class puts on cultural sophistication, Bourdieu was committing the cardinal sin of Parisianism: I believed that this son of a village postmaster had ‘drunk the Kool-Aid’ after he made his way ‘up’ to Paris and that he came to overestimate the importance

of high culture as a basis for social exclusion not only for Parisian snobs working in symbolic fields (education and the cultural fields), but also for French professionals and managers writ large (in Bourdieusian parlance, the ‘dominant class,’ roughly speaking). This hunch was backed by my experience hanging out with the (mostly) upper-middle-class students who were my peers at Stanford University in 1983. I quickly discovered that, contrary to their Parisian counterparts, they were somewhat indifferent to high culture. At the dawn of Silicon Valley, they were far more preoccupied with mastering their newly available and decidedly cumbersome portable computers, biking up the Los Altos hill, smoking dope in hot tubs, and coping with the changing sexual mores that came with the emerging AIDS crisis. This hunch led me down the path of examining the place of moral boundaries in the world of the middle and upper-middle class in Indianapolis, New York, Paris, and Clermont-Ferrand – as I wanted to avoid privileging those living in large urban centers over those on the periphery.

In this new project, I aimed to understand how these professionals and managers defined a worthy person and a life worth living: I examined how much weight the middle and upper-middle class placed on morality, cultural sophistication, and socioeconomic success, and how these signals of high status were used in making judgments about ‘people above’ and ‘people below.’ Whereas Bourdieu (following Hobbes) posited that ‘man is a wolf for man’ – that social positions are defined relationally and where ‘what I gain you lose’ – I set to explore empirically the existence of zones of tolerance, indifference, and coexistence. In between those who are ‘in’ and ‘out,’ – the dominant and the subordinate, the winners and the losers – I thought one could also find in a middle buffer zone, or a grey zone, relationships other than inclusion and exclusion, in how people draw boundaries.

While Bourdieu wrote about ‘classification struggles’ that pitted the sophisticated against the vulgar, I also became

consumed with how upper-middle-class men talked about ‘low moral standards’ and who is and is not a ‘phony’; that is, with moral categories of distinction that do not figure in Bourdieu’s lexicon. I found that contrasted categories were often used to assess moral character (the notion of intellectual integrity was particularly salient in Paris, but absent elsewhere). I started to explore empirically not only what moral boundaries people draw where, but also *the properties and mechanisms* of symbolic boundaries – properties that have since been described in the literature alternatively as ‘porous or loosely-bounded,’ ‘bright or blurred,’ ‘fuzzy or rigid,’ and ‘thick or thin.’ From there, it was an easy step to the study of models of cultural citizenship or membership, solidarity, inclusion, and recognition.

This is how I came to write my first book *Money, Morals, and Manners: The Culture of the French and the American Upper-Middle Class* (1992).⁵ This book, and a related paper, tackled the relationship between symbolic and social boundaries.⁶ I distinguished between symbolic boundaries, defined as distinctions that groups create between one another, and social boundaries, the divisions between groups in the distribution of material resources as they manifest themselves in demographic patterns such as spatial and job segregation, homophily, and intermarriage. I conceptualized the symbolic boundaries drawn by the upper-middle class as necessary but insufficient conditions for the creation of social boundaries, or inequality. I followed Bourdieu in positing that the upper-middle class imposed its criteria of evaluation on other classes in a variety of settings, and that these criteria shaped the boundaries that it draws toward other classes.

All along, I was in dialogue with now prominent post-Bourdiesian French social scientists, such as Luc Boltanski and Laurent Thévenot, who investigated regimes of worth in *De La Justification* (1991).⁷ While these two sociologists were concerned with how universal arguments are framed and used philosophy to identify patterns, I was proceeding more inductively with a concern for identifying the categories

that individuals and groups mobilize to define worth. In 2000, Thévenot and I collaborated on a collective book, *Rethinking Comparative Cultural Sociology*, which tackled evaluative grammars across national contexts.⁸ Comparative cultural analysis had all but disappeared from political science following the downfall of the ‘national character’ research tradition and the rise of behaviorism in the sixties. Building on the work of the rapidly growing field of cultural sociology (the work of Ann Swidler in particular), we focused on the ‘supply side of culture’ and proposed that national and other cultural differences could be captured by focusing on differences in the cultural repertoires or toolkits that people have access to across contexts to make sense of their world – for instance, people more often used market forces to explain what is happening in the United States than in France. These repertoires made different ways of valuing, or definitions of worth, more or less likely across places. It was clear to me that a focus on institutionalized historical national repertoires (or scripts) would allow social scientists to compare societies in cultural terms without essentializing group or national differences, that is, while avoiding another cardinal sin of social scientists, that of ‘methodological nationalism.’

Understanding whether upper-middle-class morality could serve as a basis for symbolic violence (by imposing its criteria of evaluation) required considering how different it is from the morality of the working class. My second book, *The Dignity of Working Men: Morality and the Boundaries of Race, Class, and Immigration* (2000), took on this task by drawing on interviews with American and French blue collar and low-status white collar workers – Blacks and Whites in the suburbs of New York, and French and North Africans in the suburbs of Paris.⁹ The goal was to identify how these individuals defined worthy people and drew boundaries toward less valued people, just as I had done for the upper-middle class in *Money, Morals, and Manners*. Both books drew on a large number of lengthy in-depth interviews that were somewhat experimental:

I treated the interview as a context where I observed individuals perform boundary work.¹⁰ More specifically, I asked them to describe people they consider similar or different, or superior or inferior to themselves, in both abstract and concrete terms (in reference to abstract ‘kinds of people’ but also in reference to particular neighbors, coworkers, or acquaintances). I also asked questions about the values they want to pass on to their kids, who are their heroes and role models (Donald Trump and Mother Theresa were often mentioned), and covered other topics susceptible to revealing the criteria they use to determine the worth of others. Then I compared responses across groups. The purpose was not to study the actual boundaries people draw in action, but rather the different symbolic boundaries activated in interviews, which express broader collective categories. This is an essential complement to more behaviorally focused research using controlled experiments.¹¹

The Dignity of Working Men was a study of contrasting views of cultural membership, of who is central and peripheral, or most and least valued within communities. In contrast to Bourdieu, I found that French and American workers alike define their own worth and that of others based on moral criteria – their ability to keep the world in moral order, get their kids to behave, pay their bills, and survive despite difficult working conditions and a degree of economic uncertainty. I also saw that both American and French workers used moral criteria to draw boundaries toward other groups because of their perceived moral failings – the middle class, the poor, Blacks, and immigrants – and that these various groups were not equally singled out as offending parties in the two countries.

More specifically, I saw that in general, the French workers were less likely than Americans to admire those who make a lot of money, and more likely to draw boundaries between themselves and the middle class and the rich: the remnants of a culture of class consciousness was visible in

the boundaries they drew against ‘people above’ in a way that was simply not present among American workers. Also, many French workers were indifferent toward poor people (this category was not mentioned by them), many explicitly regarded the poor as part of ‘us’, who were understood to be not social leeches, but the unfortunate temporary victim of the imperfections of capitalism. References to welfare recipients and the unemployed were at times accompanied by a critique of the capitalist system, as expressed in these words by a bank clerk: ‘It is unacceptable that some people are unemployed while others can work as much as they want.’ Most French interviewees also took in Blacks as part of ‘us’ – referring mostly to French citizens from the Caribbean islands, and immigrants from former colonies. In describing these boundaries, these French workers often mentioned references to socialism and Catholicism and French republicanism, a political ideology about national unity that negates group differences (e.g., ethnic, racial and religious identity) to posit a direct relationship between the state and abstract citizens. These cultural repertoires are supporting social solidarity among citizens (the downtrodden) regardless of private identities. Yet, paradoxically, these workers used the language of moral worth to also draw strong boundaries against immigrants, primarily Muslims, because of their alleged moral failings, that is, their inability to be self-reliant, responsible, and respectful of human and women’s rights, and their unwillingness to assimilate into French culture. They perceived this group as sponging off the welfare state, ‘playing the system,’ and lacking in self-reliance.

In contrast to these boundary patterns found in France, American workers drew strong boundaries to separate themselves from the poor, largely for their lack of self-reliance and moral character. Only a quarter were indifferent toward the poor, and half of them drew boundaries against low-income people. Few mentioned solidarity with the poor. This category was often confounded with African Americans,

toward whom White workers also draw fairly strong boundaries. On the other hand, they were largely indifferent to immigrants who were not salient in their boundary work. While some were critical, many largely perceived them as pursuing the American dream. Americans were much harsher toward the poor.

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In the past several decades, the spread of neoliberalism has encouraged an increase in individualization and a decline in social solidarity. These transformations challenge the prevailing boundary patterns I had identified in *The Dignity of Working Men*.

Neoliberalism has been described as a series of mutually reinforcing changes occurring simultaneously at multiple levels:¹² at the economic level, market mechanisms come to dominate all aspects of social life; at the political level, we have the increasing prevalence of rhetoric, laws, and public policies aimed at reinforcing market mechanisms; at the administrative level, we have a multiplication of auditing tools (with an eye for greater accountability and marketization); and at the cultural level, we have a deep transformation of shared definitions of worth (in favor of economic performance, professional success, competitiveness and self-reliance). These criteria come to permeate across all social classes.

In particular, France, as well as other European countries, have experienced market-based reforms, and these have permeated some trade unions as well as other institutions of economic and social distribution. Such changes have fostered stronger stigmatization of low-income populations, who are asked to demonstrate greater self-reliance. At the same time, growing economic competition and other political and demographic shifts have made ethno-racial boundaries more salient, leading to what many see as a more divided society with hardened boundaries drawn toward Blacks and

Muslims – just at a time when the population of various European countries is becoming more diverse. The result is a dramatic change in the overall contours of the French symbolic community, with a narrowed definition of those worthy of attention, care, and recognition against a background of growing inequality, unemployment, and intolerance in a more open and deregulated labor market.¹³

In the early 1990s, when I conducted interviews for *The Dignity of Working Men*, French workers may still have been better off than their American counterparts, because many considered themselves morally superior to the middle and upper-middle classes (often depicted as narcissistic and selfish self-promoters). They were less likely to think of themselves as losers and were more likely to mobilize alternative matrices to assert their worth, emphasizing moral value as demonstrated by one's ability to be 'there for your pals.' But much has changed since. With its insistence on competition and free markets, the growing influence of neoliberalism has encouraged the French working and lower-middle class to admire, envy and want to emulate captains of industry, the Donald Trumps of the world, resulting in a pattern similar to that of American workers. This embrace of narrower definitions of worth is likely to affect negatively their collective wellbeing: putting more emphasis on socioeconomic success means using a criterion of worth that is most easily accessible to the upper-middle class, the top twenty percent of the population – but not to them.

Similar changes may be happening in the United States, with even more disastrous effects: American workers have already largely lost their ability to define their worth independently from middle-class standards, with the strong hegemony of a culture of economic success that subsumes all other forms of human endeavors. At a time when the economic conditions of this group have been worsening, many are now self-isolating: fewer marry, go to church, and join civic associations, as their community disintegrates.¹⁴

While the rise in suicide, opioids epidemics and declining life expectancy among the American non-college graduates has been attributed to growing inequality,¹⁵ the hegemony of economic success may very well contribute to this trend, as it leaves workers without hope and without a way forward.

Some of the French findings about changes in boundaries toward the poor and immigrants (Muslims in particular) can be generalized to European societies, although they vary a bit. In a recent paper, my collaborators and I found indications that moral boundaries toward the poor (as revealed by survey responses concerning whether this group's laziness explains poverty) have grown stronger in Eastern European (but not Western European) countries.¹⁶ At the same time, the feelings of social distance toward Muslims are stronger in Western Europe.

Neoliberalism may be opening and closing different boundaries across contexts: sometimes the effect is that group-based discrimination is reduced as individuals prove their self-worth by adopting pro-market attitudes and doing well on the market. Paradoxically, neoliberalism also reinforces the stigmatization of those who are deemed lacking in self-sufficiency, even if this is due to structural causes outside of their control. The impact of neoliberalism may be tempered by varying conditions across high and low immigration countries, those that experienced differently the 2008 economic recession, and those that have embraced or resisted neoliberal policies.

Regardless of which boundaries are emphasized or weakened, networks of solidarity appear to be weakening under the pressures of neoliberalism as populist parties have increased their support across most advanced industrial societies. What this portends for the future is more isolation for the stigmatized, and for others as well, as they find themselves working harder and more hours to keep afloat. This is associated with a decline in collective wellbeing for all: as social trust is declining, communities are weakening, the

poor and some ethno-racial and immigrant groups are more stigmatized and the rich pay more to offset increased reliance on state provision and safety and to counter radicalization and related social problems. What will make the social whole cohere?

The most widely discussed alternative has been to address growing inequality through state redistribution. Yet, another approach is possible: to extend cultural membership to the largest number by promoting ways of living that are not fully organized around the principle of profit maximization, away from the one-dimensional man decried by critical theorist Herbert Marcuse fifty years ago.¹⁷ A healthy society makes available a multiplicity of criteria through which individuals can assess their worth, so that fewer are condemned to think of themselves as losers. This is important, because having dignity and agency has been found to have as profound an impact on subjective wellbeing as income.¹⁸ Collective wellbeing can be best fed by the coexistence of a plurality of forms of recognition (based on various types of social contributions pertaining to craftsmanship, spirituality, solidarity, responsibility, civil participation, education, care, and so forth). This can be accomplished through various means, some of which will be discussed in the conclusion. But stigmatized groups have a central role to play in the process. The more they can maintain a notion of their own sense of self-worth and dignity, and have it confirmed by others, the better off they are. How can they accomplish this in practice?

A second prism of inequality concerns how stigmatized groups experience and respond to exclusion, which clearly matters if group membership has such an impact on access to resources and subjective wellbeing. I approach the experience of these groups as a member of a historically stigmatized group, that is, as a francophone Québécoise.

What has been the historical situation of this group? For much of the twentieth century, members of my group were confined to the lower rung of the labor market and faced sneers and condescension concerning their distinctive society, language and culture. From the eighteenth century on, British colonizers had developed an economic system that stunted the development of Quebec society and subordinated it to the interests of the English Canadian elite. It was only after the middle of the twentieth century that the tide turned, with the rapid growth of a strong technocratic state and a vast cooperative sector that served as tools for collective empowerment of the francophone population. From the early sixties on, the *Révolution Tranquille* and the Independence movement led by the Parti Québécois (PQ) provided alternative narratives that contested stigmatization and affirmed a positive collective identity. This cultural revolution is the context in which I came of age – the PQ came to power the month after I started college in 1976. This historical moment continues to exercise a powerful influence on my understanding of how other stigmatized groups can and should deal with exclusion in a variety of social contexts.

My coauthors and I examined this topic in a recently published book that took ten years of preparation: *Getting Respect: Responding to Stigma in the United States, Brazil and Israel*. Through lengthy interviews with over four hundred randomly sampled working- and middle-class men and women conducted in and around New York City, Rio de

Janeiro and Tel Aviv in 2007–2008, we compared the main victim of exclusion in these countries: African Americans and Black Brazilians (*pretos* and *pardos*, or Blacks and mixed) as well as Arab Palestinian citizens of Israel (the study also includes two groups at the bottom of the labor market which due to space I cannot discuss here: Mizrahi Jews and Ethiopian Jews). Our multinational research team asked members of stigmatized groups to describe an incident where they were treated unfairly: ‘What happened? Where were you? How did you respond?’ We also asked: ‘What do you teach your children about how to respond to exclusion? What is the best response that your group has at its disposal to respond to racism?’ These questions generated narratives on actual incidents and on normative responses. Using computer-assisted content analysis, we systematically compared them to determine whether specific patterns could be identified. And then we worked on explaining differences.

What do these narratives (or stories) look like? One example is that of Joe, a middle-class African-American man, who finds himself alone with several Whites in an elevator at work. He described the interaction as follows:

One of them made a joke about Blacks and monkeys. I said ‘Man, I ain’t into jokes’ ... His demeanor changed, my demeanor changed. All the positive energy that was in there was being sucked out because of the racial part... I told myself ‘Get out of [here] because if I stay, I’m going to be in that circle and [won’t be able] to get out.’ The stress level rose. My tolerance was getting thin, my blood pressure peaking and my temper rising. By the grace of God, thank you Jesus, as I stepped off the elevator, there was a Black minister walking past. I said ‘Can I speak to you for a minute because I just encountered something that I got to talk about because I am this far from exploding.’ I had been at the job for a week. This is all I need to get me fired. Now I am trying to get through the affair to decide if I should go to the city to complain.

Joe not only describes to us what happens, but also his reactions and the evolution of his thinking about how to respond. As we analyzed such narratives, we aimed to establish whether our interviewees responded to incidents at all, and if they did, whether they aimed to confront, demonstrate their worth through hard work and competence, or self-isolate. We also considered what we came to call ‘management of the self,’ which has to do with how interviewees think about the practical consequences of responding one way or another (as when one said ‘I don’t want to be viewed as the angry Black bitch again, but as the successful lawyer’).

Why these three countries? The United States-Brazil comparison is theoretically motivated because the United States has stronger racial boundaries than Brazil. In the comparative sociology of race, Brazil often stands for the ideal type of country with weak racial boundaries (with low residential segregation, a high frequency of intermarriage, etc.). For its part, Israel stands in stark opposition to Brazil given its walls and security checkpoints, and the fact that its main excluded group, Arab Palestinians, are largely segregated (institutionally and spatially) from the majority group. At the onset of the project, we were pondering where the United States would fall in between these two extremes. The goal was in part to find a response to this question.

We discovered that members of stigmatized groups report different types of exclusion experiences and different types of responses. Experiences and responses are enabled by the distinct cultural repertoires individuals have access to in their national context; and the way group boundaries are defined for each group (what sociologists call ‘groupness’).

In the United States, legal frameworks defining and prohibiting racial discrimination make it relatively easy for African Americans to confront. At the same time, legally defined instances of discrimination are not the ones most frequently reported. Instead, the African-American men and women we talked with mostly describe experiences of

‘assault on worth’ (e.g., being ignored, insulted, overlooked and underestimated) when queried about incidents where they felt they had been treated unfairly. We found across our three countries this preponderance of assault on self over discrimination in the examples of experiences that were offered to us.

When it came to responses, African Americans also engaged in ‘management of self’ (e.g., pondering the incident and how best to respond, instead of confronting the other party), or even ‘not responding’ (e.g., due to surprise at being treated in this way). Interestingly, the normative response most used by members of this group to describe the way they teach their children to respond to racism (gaining an education and access to economic rewards) is the response encouraged by neoliberal scripts centering on competitiveness and self-reliance. Collective responses focused on group self-empowerment were promoted by only twenty percent of our interviewees – interviews may yield different responses today (after *Black Lives Matter*) than they did in 2007-2008.

Far more frequent when facing an actual incident is confronting. In fact, confronting is the response mentioned by four out of five of African-American interviewees, compared to half of the Brazilians, and still fewer among Arab Palestinians. And confronting often means offering an alternative view of who African Americans (or the individual) are as a group. Affirming moral worth is central to these responses, and it often means ‘educating the ignorant’ about Black people, defending dignity and asking for respect. In some cases, it even means affirming one’s mere presence or existence as a human being.

Take the case of, Meagan, an African-American teacher, who describes how she deals with White people who cut in front of her at Pathmark (a grocery store). She observes ‘They do that all the time; they’re just trying to be superior’ and recalls saying to one particular woman: ‘You do this not because I am Black, but because you are White, because my

being Black has nothing to do with you.’ Then she reflects: ‘Of course, it comes as a shock to them. They don’t want the confrontation. If you confront them, they are not going to give you a word back because you are not there.... I don’t think she is going to do this to too many Black women. One woman, I actually put my foot out to trip her...’

We were surprised to discover that Black Brazilians are equally likely to confront, not respond, or engage in management of the self (while again, African American mostly confront). This is in part because the former have far more uncertainty about whether or not they experience a racist incident. They do so only when ‘race is explicitly mentioned,’ for fear of being label ‘bigot.’ This is illustrated by the case of Ana, a Black Brazilian woman journalist. Elegantly dressed, she comes back to her hotel after a long day of work. She mentions her room number to obtain the key to her room. Instead of presenting it, the male clerk calls the room and waits a bit before hanging up and saying while winking, ‘I’m sorry, he’s not there’ – obviously thinking that she’s a prostitute calling a client. Ana is mortified but does not confront. Yet, when we ask her ten years later to describe an incident where she was treated unfairly, this is the incident that comes to her mind. She concludes: ‘I could not confront him because he did not say anything that I could point out to show that he was being racist. I went to my room, called my husband [who is White]. He told me to calm down and that I was exaggerating.’

Why is Ana so hesitant to confront? The cultural repertoire of ‘racial mixture,’ which captured the blurredness of racial boundaries, is hyper-salient in Brazil, and works against the polarization of racial groups. Compared to African Americans, members of this group think of their identity as anchored more in skin color than shared culture or history; as many families are racially mixed, they do not experience strong spatial segregation within Rio, which further weakens their sense of racial belonging. In addition, the cultural schemas about White on Black racism that are so omnipresent in the United

States are far less so in Brazil; not having immediate access to omnipresent scripts about racism has a direct impact on the response. Finally, the large degree of class inequality in Brazil makes class schemas particularly salient compared to racial schemas for interpreting incidents and may add confusion to interpreting the situation.

In contrast, why are African Americans such as Meagan much less hesitant to confront? Her confidence is enabled by readymade scripts about repeated racist interaction between Blacks and Whites, which are sustained by a collective awareness of racial exclusion, inequality, and history that confirms to Meagan that she is witnessing racist behavior. A legal culture, backed by the Civil Rights Acts, convinces her that it is legitimate to stand up for oneself when facing racial slights. Her strong sense of groupness, which makes her race salient, also feeds her confidence to confront. In Brazil, by contrast, confronting is often done in a more low-key way, with an orientation toward ‘educating’ non-Blacks.

For their part, Arab Palestinians say they experience blatant insults (‘you dirty Arab’), being threatened physically, and viewed as ‘the enemy within,’ due to impugned solidarity with the Palestinian cause. They easily attribute these experiences to their nationality. They never mention being ‘misunderstood,’ as they have no such hope. They never use legal tools, even in cases of egregious abuse, as they have no trust in the system. Their response is often to ignore, as they have little hope for change. They frequently aim to gain emotional detachment – putting themselves above the aggressors. As a postal worker states ‘the best way to stick it to someone is to actually ignore them.’ Ignoring incidents and self-isolation makes sense in a context of high residential segregation and where confrontation is unlikely to yield results. Unlike Brazilians, Arab Palestinians rarely have doubt about whether an incident has occurred. Unlike African Americans, this does not lead them to confrontation, given the constraints they face.

Cultural repertoires have pride of place in our explanation. Again, these refer to the scripts respondents draw on, to make sense of the experiences that they have. They include national myths: the American Dream, Brazilian racial democracy, and Israeli Zionism. For instance, Brazilian racial democracy helps us understand why Black Brazilians confront less and Zionism helps explain why Mizrahi and Ethiopian Jews embrace ‘participatory destigmatization,’ by downplaying discrimination and emphasizing their religious identity, which grounds their national cultural membership.¹⁹ These repertoires also include transnational scripts such as the promotion of human rights; or neoliberal scripts (competitiveness and socioeconomic success) that sustain individualist strategies and are most readily available in the United States. We also consider how each group makes sense of its historical place in the country (scripts about slavery and Jim Crow segregation in the United States), the moral character of the dominant group (often viewed as domineering and strongly differentiated in the United States or ‘like us’ in Brazil, where everyone has a Black grandmother somewhere), etc.

Getting Respect brings cultural structures in dialogue with a literature (mostly from political science) that focuses on material/institutional/political structures, and with a literature (mostly from social psychology) on cognition. The goal in moving forward will be to create a bridge between both lines of work. Many psychologists working on stigmas typically consider identities and boundaries as a cognitive phenomenon located in peoples’ heads – with a focus on in-group favoritism and out-group dynamics, while political scientists typically focus on institutions and material factors or on identity politics as an area for political struggle. We need to better connect different levels of analysis that often remain separate.²⁰ For this purpose, my collaborators and I redirect the inquiry

by adopting a multidimensional bottom-up approach to boundary formation that locates groups in their local and historical contexts. We privilege meaning-making as the medium by which groups are constituted, and we attend to how cultural and institutional as well as broad societal constraints manifest themselves in individual-level interactions to differently shape experiences of ethno-racial exclusion. Our inductive approach adds precision and systemic content analysis, and a fully developed multi-level explanation, to the important existing literature on responses to everyday racism.

In Part 2 we found that two of the main responses from members of stigmatized groups are to confront and challenge exclusion; and to adopt the normative response which consists in demonstrating that one meets the mainstream (individualistic) standards for cultural membership, focused on mobility: our interviewees believe it is best to demonstrate competitiveness, that they are hardworking, and can be upwardly mobile and achieve socioeconomic success – the very response that is encouraged by neoliberal scripts of a worthy self. This is tantamount to assimilating into the mainstream. Is this likely to be a successful strategy? It may well lead to better jobs and life conditions for some. But many studies have shown that the most adaptive response for members of minority groups is to engage the mainstream (for instance, mainstream school culture) while holding on to a strong positive vision of group identity.²¹ Such studies suggest that affirming one’s group identity, one’s distinctiveness, fosters subjective wellbeing. Their findings speak against assimilation or the adoption of ‘mainstream’ outlooks, and in favor of fostering a broad range of ways of being and assessing worth, away from the well-established standards of neoliberalism. Such an approach may work best when coupled with systematic collective efforts to destigmatize groups (instead of encouraging their assimilation) – for instance, to explicitly make visible and address the stigmatization of the poor, instead of shaming them and forcing their assimilation

into mainstream society, which is not easily attainable in the absence of necessary resources. But how can destigmatization be achieved? Important opportunities may be found by building on psychological studies of mental and other stigmas, as well as on studies of social movements and knowledge workers involved in the destigmatization of groups, such as people living with HIV-AIDS.²²

If people want to demonstrate their individual worth, we need to better understand which criteria are to be met and how people are evaluated. This is an issue I consider in the third part of this essay by focusing specifically on standards of excellence in academia, which zooms in on merit as a type of worth. While this may seem a narrow topic, it gives me a window into meritocracy, objectivity, connoisseurship, democracy, taste and expertise, and the rhetoric of excellence in neoliberal societies marked by an ever-expanding quantitative audit culture aiming to maximize performance.

After being promoted to the rank of full professor at Princeton University in 2000, I set out to open the black box of evaluation, to enable those outside 'the system' to take a peek in, so as to better understand the secret world of peer review. I wanted to explain how decisions are made in the attribution of grants and fellowships by multidisciplinary panels in the social sciences and humanities. I aimed to explore questions such as: How do a variety of humanistic and scientific disciplines define excellence? How do scholars go about recognizing quality? How do they factor various types of diversity (gender, race, geography, and types of institutions) into their decisions?

The answers to these questions are not as obvious as they may seem. Indeed, standards of excellence are often far from transparent and clearly delimited. To address these questions, we need to consider how symbolic boundaries (including moral ones) and other elements of the social context impact on the merit judgments that are made. For instance, we need to consider how panelists with varying degrees of experience, seniority, and disciplinary and professional prestige go about making collective decisions when they serve together on multidisciplinary fellowship panels. When and why do they think the process is fair (or not)? What do they think corrupts

it? These questions were at the center of the research reported in my book: *How Professors Think: Inside the Curious World of Academic Judgment*.

This project came naturally to me as an ‘insider-outsider’: by the start of the millennium, I was perceived in my discipline as an ‘insider,’ given my status as an established tenured faculty member of one of the leading sociology departments in the world. Yet, I felt like an outsider of sorts, as a (still young) woman and an immigrant, and someone whose trajectory was improbable – as one of the rare European PhDs to land successfully in American sociology. I had been fortunate, as my field of study, cultural sociology, had become central to the discipline as I matured as a researcher. A marginal area of research when I immigrated in 1983, by 2000 the sociology of culture was the largest section of the American Sociological Association, and a field in which many departments were hiring.

Another factor that led me to write *How Professors Think* is that I long had a fascination with how knowledge is evaluated. My dissertation research detailed the rapid rise of the social sciences and the decline of the humanities in Quebec between 1960 and 1980, at a time when this society was going through an accelerated modernization process (while humanistic education prevailed and theology and philosophy were among the most prestigious disciplines in 1960, by the early 1980s, economists and lawyers had replaced them at the top of the hierarchy, given the increasing demand for their expertise). Against all odds, I had published in the *American Journal of Sociology* a paper titled ‘How to Become a Dominant French Philosopher: The Case of Jacques Derrida’ just as ‘French post-structuralism’ was reshaping the humanities in the United States.²³ My thirst for understanding knowledge cultures had yet to be quenched, and it was with much excitement that I embarked on a study of academic evaluation.

This exploration of the world of evaluation eventually awoke a broader project, that of understanding how

evaluation and other cultural processes feed into inequality. After all, evaluation had become an amazingly dynamic area of research in the United States and Europe after 2000: international conferences were multiplying and many young scholars were attracted to the field, particularly in Scandinavia, Germany and France. I set out to study through comparison cultural processes such as identification and rationalization as they manifest themselves in recognition, stigmatization, racialization, legitimation and standardization. After describing some of the main conclusions from *How Professors Think* and how I extended this work to consider peer review in other countries, I turn to the broader research agenda concerned with evaluation and valuation and cultural processes.

At the center of *How Professors Think* are the criteria used by 81 individuals involved in the twelve funding panels I studied.²⁴ How do scholars define originality and intellectual and social significance, I wondered? How do they determine that there is too little or too much theory and method? What kinds of proposals are typically described as brilliant or ‘so-so’? As for my work on class cultures, a priority was analyzing the moral language that was omnipresent in discussions of worth: I quickly discovered that evaluators often talked about originality in moral terms, contrasting applicants who are ‘courageous’ and ‘adventurous’ with those who are ‘lazy’ and ‘conventional.’²⁵ Whereas students of peer review typically view such extra-cognitive evaluation as corrupting the review process, I found that emotions (excitement and boredom especially) are intrinsic to evaluation. Moreover, I determined that one cannot understand how evaluation unfolds without taking into consideration the self-concept of evaluators, including what motivates them to serve as panelists, their desire to be reaffirmed as competent and accomplished

connoisseurs, their building of trust with other panelists, and so forth. Skillful interactions – knowing how to listen and to disagree in a collegial fashion for instance – are sine qua non conditions for a felicitous evaluation.

Comparing disciplines turned out to be fruitful – traveling from the most humanistic and interpretive to the most scientific and positivist. The weight panelists attribute to various standards (e.g., ‘quality’ versus ‘diversity’), and how they describe and represent the process of evaluation to themselves vary across these types of disciplines. So does whether panelists think ‘subjectivity’ has a corrupting influence on evaluation (the caricatured view held by the harder social sciences); or whether it is regarded as essential to appreciation and connoisseurship (a view more popular in the humanities and interpretive social sciences). Disciplinary evaluative cultures diverge on many dimensions, including whether panelists believe ‘excellence’ resides in the grant proposal under evaluation (this is the case for economists), or is a product of the interaction, that is, a quality that crystallizes as panelists discuss a proposal. This latter perspective is popular in the most interpretative disciplines (literary studies, anthropology), where few worry about the absence of consensus.

As in *Money, Morals, and Manners*, the research for *How Professors Think* asked interviewees to draw boundaries, that is, in this case, to describe the best and worst panelists and proposals; arguments made against and in favor of proposals; and their ranking of proposals prior to and after deliberation. I also asked whether they believed in academic excellence, which scholar best incarnates it, and whether they think ‘the cream rises to the top.’

Unsurprisingly, how an English scholar and an economist define this cream share little in common. I believe this is not because the academic enterprise is bankrupt or meaningless, but because disciplines are tailored to studying different objects. Moreover, criteria for assessing quality or excellence

are differently weighted across disciplines and can be the object of intense conflicts, which arise when the coexistence of a plurality of criteria is threatened: for instance, when economists impose their own hierarchy of standards on other social sciences.

One of the *leitmotifs* of my analysis is that disciplines shine under different lights, are good at different things, and are best located on different matrices or dimensions, precisely because their objects differ so dramatically. Each discipline comes with a distinct set of analytical tools that allows them to attack different slivers of reality through distinct and complementary angles. Thus, excellence and diversity (here, epistemological and methodological diversity) are not antonymic. Recognizing the different characters of what different disciplines study, and the need for a coexistence of various forms of excellence, is an essential condition for continued parallel or converging growth across fields. To encourage social science disciplines to coalesce around one field (say, economics, a discipline that has a strong hegemony claim) would work counter to gaining a more complete understanding of the social world.

Another challenge described in *How Professors Think* is that the evaluation process is not linear: evaluators typically lump together different sets of proposals, based on various characteristics (topic, method, geographical area, or even place in the alphabet). They are often aware of inconsistencies in the standards they employ, as they may use different criteria to assess different groups of proposals – with originality being salient for one group, and social significance for another. If diverse, and sometimes contradictory, criteria of evaluation coexist, it does not mean that evaluation is random or indefensible. This way of doing evaluation is a response to pragmatic constraints: evaluators have only a few hours to eliminate as many proposals as possible before they fly back home.

Various means are available to enforce consistency in criteria, to ensure reliability and reduce ambiguity –

quantification of productivity through rating, which is assiduously promoted by many evaluation agencies that are preaching the international of norms of evaluation under this banner. Yet, in line with the Habermasian tradition, deliberation continues to play a crucial role in panels, as it is essential in creating trust. This is because most believe fair decisions emerge from a dialogue between various types of expertise, which leaves room for discretion, uncertainty, and weighing in different factors and various forms of excellence. It also leaves room for flexibility and for groups to develop a shared sense of what defines excellence. Personal authority does not corrupt the process but is perceived as a medium for expertise and grounds trust in the quality of the decisions made: it is precisely because they are connoisseurs, that the panelists are invited to deliberate, and so they do together – although they often have attained different levels of professional prestige. This approach to evaluating contrasts with mechanistic techniques of evaluation (such as quantitative ratings) that have more built-in protections against the vagaries of connoisseurship.

To get the job done, evaluators follow ‘customary rules of evaluation’ that are never explicitly taught – only observed and learned by osmosis. These rules include (among others) a notion of *disciplinary pluralism*, which requires that panelists respect disciplinary differences; *disciplinary deference*, which means that experts have jurisdictional sovereignty over their field – breaking this rule creates major conflicts; *bracketing personal interest*, which requires that one abstains when the work of friends and colleagues is being discussed; and *cognitive contextualization*, which requires using criteria of evaluation that are valued in the discipline of the applicant, and not those of the evaluator. Most American academics in research departments appear to largely share such rules concerning what is expected of them when evaluating. Those who are described as the worst panelists are typically described as violating such rules.

In most fields, graduate students take seminars where they not only learn their field but also observe their professors perform evaluation in a range of contexts. These experiences shape their self-concept and their evaluative practices slowly but surely. This socialization occurs in other countries and on other continents of course, but in the American case, the cultural scripts concerning how to evaluate appear to be particularly widely shared and strongly institutionalized, especially across research departments. The existence of a national labor market that offers the possibility of mobility may encourage academics to embrace such customary rules throughout their career, as embracing these norms is often interpreted as signaling excellence in research.

In the United States as elsewhere, peer review has come under considerable scrutiny in recent years. Many have criticized its weak reliability and consistency, and its ‘old-boy’ culture that reproduces inequalities. Are academics a self-producing elite? How meritocratic is higher education? How discriminatory and biased is it?

This world of evaluation is characterized by inherent tension: all evaluators are embedded in networks of relationships. They are not holy spirits floating above other humans: they have students, colleagues, and friends who coexist with them in often fairly small cognitive milieus (i.e., in subfields or subspecialties); and they adjudicate the work of individuals from whom they have only a few degrees of separation. Their standards of evaluation are embedded in networks as well, although they may seem absolute to academics themselves. Most know that connoisseurship can easily lead to auto-reproduction: evaluators often define excellence as ‘what speaks most to me’ or ‘what is most like me,’ with the result that the ‘haves’ (anyone associated with a reputed institution or a dominant paradigm) may tend to get a disproportionate amount of resources. This cognitive auto-reproduction helps explain the conservative bias in funding (why particularly creative and original projects are

widely believed to have to clear higher hurdles to get funded or published). Nevertheless, most panelists believe particularism corrupts the process and state that the worst evaluators are those who promote their own students and ideas.

Ideally, our ‘meritocratic’ system requires that applicants compete on a level playing field. This is one reason why in the United States cognitive homophily is often counterbalanced by an obligation to take into consideration various ‘diversity criteria’ when evaluating proposals – gender and ethno-racial identity (for underrepresented groups), as well as the type of institution (public, private, liberal arts college, and research university) and the region (center and peripheral) where applicants are located. To only fund scholars teaching in elite universities would be widely perceived as a sure mark of a failed panel. To not factor in diversity would cast suspicion on the legitimacy of a competition; all the funding organizations I studied listed it as a formal criterion of evaluation and in this, they are not atypical.

How Professors Think discussed the formation of the American academic self, where panelists are invested in fair peer review in part because it confirms in their eyes their worth as responsible and knowledgeable professionals. The distinctiveness of the American academic self becomes visible when considered through a comparative lens, when contrasted with peer review as practiced elsewhere – I authored several papers that compare it implicitly or explicitly with peer review as practiced in Canada, China, France, Spain, and the Nordic countries. Many experts in the world of research would like to institutionalize one unified international system of evaluation largely shaped around the ‘neutral’ evaluative practices that prevail in North America, as captured by various scores of productivity and by neutral deliberative peer review. While I did not examine this world of quantification, I found much specificity in how deliberative evaluation is conducted by American social scientists, which make this system not easily transposable elsewhere – just as I had found that Bourdieu’s

early work was shaped by distinctive features of French society that made it more appropriate to study class cultures in France than the United States.

With over 4,000 universities and colleges (including community colleges) dispersed over the full size of the American territory, and the absence of a federal-level ministry in charge of higher education and research, the situation in the United States contrasts strongly with what one finds in France, to take only one example. There, finding independent evaluators is a challenge given the small size of networks and their concentration in Paris. Such conditions shape what kind of academic self, and culture of evaluation, the higher education system enables.

I became more aware of the high degree of legitimacy that peer review benefits from in the United States when I spent a sabbatical year in Paris shortly after the publication of *How Professors Think*. This constituted an experiment of sorts. For one, the topic of peer review could not be mentioned in France without being associated with neoliberalism – a connection that was rarely made in the American context. As I was finishing my book, French universities faced a major crisis when the minister in charge of higher education and research tried to impose an important reform officially aimed at improving the standing of French universities in international rankings (such as the Shanghai ranking). Unions and many academics denounced increased pressures to keep track of their performance as an attempt to subsume academics to the imperatives of the state and the economy by lowering their autonomy. Peer review, a process that seemed as natural to American academics as water is to fish, became increasingly contested and resented. An ‘anti-evaluation revolt’ (manifested, for instance, in an open call by unions to refuse excellence bonuses) brought to light the extent to which peer review requires a distinctive type of academic self, which cannot be sustained equally in all types of higher education systems. This academic self is at the center of the puzzle, and

understanding better the conditions that made one kind of world or the other possible is now crucial.

One significant factor is that French researchers have long experienced routine interference from top civil servants and from university administrators in the peer review process. For one, the direction of the Centre national de recherche scientifique (CNRS) and presidents of universities are entitled to veto or change the ranking of candidates for promotion. Such interferences weaken the legitimacy of evaluation for both applicants and panelists, and reinforce the belief that the peer review process is a farce. Of course, cynicism is also found in North America, but national progressive unions that question the value of peer review are less frequent on this continent – particularly in the United States. Moreover, the political critique of neoliberalism and the audit society has not percolated in American academia to the same degree as it did in France. These factors converge to maintain a stronger faith in meritocratic evaluation as an essential aspect of the functioning of American higher education and research – although admittedly this fate is far weaker as one moves away from the center of academic power and prestige toward the outskirts of this field constellation.

The drama of the internationalization of higher education is at issue everywhere, at a time when excellence has become the mantra of university systems across the planet, as more technologies of evaluation and types of rankings are being put in place. There are multiple pushes and pulls against institutionalizing a pseudo universalism and meritocracy against a background of suspicion toward neoliberalism, the quantification of excellence, political interference, as well as localism and clientelism. These observations serve as fodder for a general theory of evaluation and other cultural processes, a topic to which I now briefly turn.

The last years have seen an explosion of interest in the topic of evaluation, with the convergence of literatures inspired by Bourdieu or Boltanski and Thévenot; by a growing paradigm studying how organizations go about evaluating (by using various sets of institutional templates or logics), and by empirical studies in cultural and economic sociology in the United States and Europe. This exciting proliferation is rarely disciplined by a commitment to knowledge accumulation, with the result that most are working in an echo chamber, with limited impact on the broader social science literature. It is with this concern for theory accumulation and construction in mind that I proposed an analytical approach, distinguishing between valuation (the act of giving value) and evaluation (the act of assessing value).²⁶ I suggested that both entail categorization and legitimation. Categorization involves ‘determining in which group the entity [...] under consideration belongs’ and legitimation concerns ‘recognition by oneself and others of the value of an entity.’ If categorization requires the sorting out of types of products or goods, legitimation entails an intersubjective consensus around their ranking.

One can understand how valuation and evaluation work by considering the constraints under which they operate, such as

- 1 *conventions* (not only the customary rules described above, but also whether evaluation is done in public or in isolation, which affects accountability and shared views about disclosures of conflict of interest);

- 2 *the method of comparison* (e.g., rating versus ranking – the latter is zero sum while the former is not);

- 3 *the criteria of evaluation* (these may be more or less formalized and consistent);

- 4 *the legitimacy of the classificatory order* (which can be more or less policed, contested, consensual, hierarchical, and stable);

5 *self-concepts of evaluators* (this includes the degree of investment and identification with conventions, which is tied to institutionalization of the field); and

6 a focus on the *roles of technical supports* (e.g., demo, devices, and instruments). These analytical distinctions can be points of focus to compare evaluation in various types of contexts, and evaluation of different types of cultural objects: for instance, fiction reviews, peer review, and management consulting. There are many differences between these three types of evaluation, but most importantly, while fiction reviewing mostly depends on connoisseurship, peer review rests on intersubjective validation, and management consulting depends on technical validation.²⁷ Comparing such objects of evaluation in terms of how quality is defined and recognized (i.e., the process of evaluation), the evaluator's self-concept, and their relation to the audience can enable better cumulative theorizing in how evaluation shapes the environment and opens and closes opportunities for people.

Let's take the simple case of peer review at the *London Review of Books*. We know that women have been significantly underrepresented as both reviewers and authors. This has an immediate impact on the field of fiction and nonfiction reviewing in the Anglo-Saxon world, since the LRB is an important gatekeeper in certifying quality in this world. Addressing this problem should go far beyond documenting gender discrimination and biases: it also needs to consider whether construction of quality is coded in such a way that women are less likely to perform well on these very dimensions. For instance, if excellence and brilliance are associated with confidence, as manifested by declarative or aggressive styles of writing, this may lead to women being less often viewed as belonging to 'the cream of the crop.' We know that aggressiveness is associated with masculine stereotypes and work against women. More work is needed to understand whether and how such criteria of evaluation that favor one group over another get institutionalized and operate. To make

sense of such important issues, it is crucial that we develop the comparative study of evaluation and valuation, and of the role of cultural processes in the production of inequality.

In a recent coauthored paper, my students and I have examined abstractly cultural processes through which worth is produced and assessed, building on recent studies of commensuration, standardization, identification, and other processes.²⁸ Students of inequality often focused on dominant actors and institutions and how they monopolize material and nonmaterial resources. As a complement to their work, we need to gain better purchase on micro-cultural processes feeding into inequality.

What do the latter have in common? First, 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. They also involve a sorting out of people, actions, or environments that requires the creation and stabilization of group boundaries and hierarchies, intersubjectively and/or through institutions. These boundaries and hierarchies are typically a collective accomplishment that requires the use of shared conventions and the coordination of actions (as I described in the case of the customary rules of evaluation mobilized in peer review).

Second, cultural processes concern the distribution of material and nonmaterial resources as well as recognition. As argued by philosophers Charles Taylor and Axel Honneth,²⁹ recognition is central in establishing groups as worthy and valued members of the community, as individuals endowed with full cultural membership. More generally, inequality operates through the distribution of legitimacy *and* material and social resources. In the case of fellowship competitions, winners get at once funding, and certification

that their work is better than others. Both matter for inequality.

Third, cultural processes do not solely depend on the actions of dominant actors: subordinates often participate in cultural processes as much as dominant agents do. Sorting is an unintended consequence of (intentionally or not) coordinated action. Thus, the intention of the dominant is not a necessary condition for producing these outcomes as is the case in traditional approaches to inequality that focus on the monopolization of material and nonmaterial resources by dominant parties. Although it can be! In the case just discussed, panelists do not contribute to peer review to impose their will (many other motivations are evoked). But their participation shapes who gets what.

Finally, cultural processes 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 use schemas that are largely taken for granted and made available by the cultural repertoires that surround them (e.g., the customary rules described above, which are shaped by belief in meritocracy). Thus, in considering cultural processes we move from a focus on discrete instrumental action aimed at monopolizing material and nonmaterial resources to a focus on a range of ongoing routine relationships that enable and constrain social action.

To summarize, cultural processes are ongoing actions/practices that feed into structures (organizations, institutions) and can produce various types of outcomes, including inequality – but meaning-making is also influenced by powerful forces shaping the criteria in use (such as cultural repertoires). Cultural processes are activated in the course of everyday interactions and result in an array of consequences that may feed into distribution and recognition. Through processes such as standardization and evaluation, and racialization and stigmatization, 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.

The cultural process of evaluation undergirds the everyday functioning of workplaces, schools, the military, and numerous other social institutions. In the workplace, hiring decisions require evaluative procedures regarding who is of worth or who has competence. Other cultural processes like racialization and stigmatization also play a role in the evaluative process for achievement. The particular instantiations of the process depend upon routine practices and scripts that organizations and individuals deploy to assign value to various types or groups of people and objects. These are the objects of a growing literature on how organizations operate as contexts of inequality that sort people on paths for gaining access to resources. But much remains to be done before this research coalesces into a fully integrated field of research. This will require bringing together distribution and recognition as two distinct, but complementary dimensions of inequality.

This essay on ‘Prisms of Inequality’ has aimed to broaden and systematize our understanding of the role of moral boundaries, exclusion and academic evaluation in the production of inequality. These topics were approached as privileged sites of observation from which to consider contests over definitions of worth and their effect on inequality in the neoliberal era. I explored the boundaries and distinctions that groups create between one another, based on a range of criteria. This is what connects the three strands of research: in each case, various criteria are at work (to determine what defines a worthy person; how to make members of stigmatized groups worthy; and how to assess scholarship). In each case, some criteria become dominant (those moral criteria valued by neoliberalism, which feed the exclusion of those who lack self-reliance; how a stigmatized group should demonstrate its worth through work; and how quantified productivity is favored by international rankings, a topic I alluded to). In all cases I argued that moral criteria play a central role in evaluation, and that a plurality of criteria is desirable. For instance, in Part 1, I suggested that a collective wellbeing is fostered when a society makes available various criteria through which individuals can assess their worth, so that few think of themselves as losers; only the upper-middle class can shine when the dominant matrix is socioeconomic success and competitiveness. In Part 2, I argued that neoliberalism favors individualistic responses to exclusion, grounded in the display of economic success, hard work and competence, normative responses adopted even by those it disadvantages; and that members of stigmatized groups do better when they embrace their distinctiveness, without rejecting the mainstream. In Part 3, I argue that in the world of academia, it is crucial to recognize that different disciplines are best at different things and that they shine under different lights. One model (e.g., the standards of economics) does not fit all, even if the

institutionalization of international standards of scholarly evaluation aims to eliminate differences.

The essay concluded with a summary of the fundamental characteristics of cultural processes – the ways in which they are differentiated from the distribution of material and nonmaterial resources. The affordance of value and (comparative) evaluations relates to the way people are categorized into groups, and how symbolic boundaries are drawn and justified. These culturally specific scripts determine the criteria that define a person’s worth – even if the common narrative is that the distribution of material and nonmaterial resources follows from objective and universal displays of individual worth. All in all, preventing over-homogenization or a domination of a narrow definition of worth or cultural membership is essential for collective wellbeing. Herbert Marcuse was right in denouncing the unidimensional man: let a hundred thousand flowers bloom! This can best be achieved by fostering a variety of types of recognition for stigmatized categories.

How to achieve this? There are a great many possibilities. Top-down actions by governments can broaden cultural membership to the largest number, through policies that value stigmatized groups. The adoption of same-sex marriage law is a case in point: a study of 47 states has shown that those that have adopted same-sex marriage have seen a reduction of 7 percent of attempted suicides among public high school students between the age of 15 and 24.³⁰ Others involve ordinary people: since the election of Donald Trump in November 2016, many American citizens display on their property posters and flags in solidarity with LGBTQs and Muslims. Yet others involve social scientists, who give citizens the analytical tools they need to help destigmatize groups.

An important next challenge at the nexus of politics and social science research will be to bridge economics and sociology, to better understand how recognition of identity and distribution of resources interact as complementary

dimensions of inequality, which are still too rarely put together. This is *the* question of the day, at a time when inequality increases and the social whole is losing its cohesion. The tasks ahead are daunting, and social scientists are well equipped to rise to the occasion. Nothing is more urgent at the present historical juncture.

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²
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For this book I interviewed panelists, panel chairs, and program officers involved in the final deliberations of five different national funding competitions over a two-year period. They were interviewed about their own disciplines and disciplinary standards as well as about their perceptions of the similarities and differences between fields. In three cases, I observed deliberations firsthand. Funding organizations (and the specific competitions studied) are as follows: the American Council for Learned Societies (ACLS – the Humanities Fellowship program); the Society of Fellows (a competition sponsored by a chapter at a top research university); the Social Science Research Council (SSRC – the International Dissertation Field Research program); the Woodrow Wilson National Fellowship Foundation (WNNFF – the Women's Studies program); and an anonymous foundation in the social sciences. I was less interested in establishing whether respondents' accounts of their actions correspond to their observed behavior than in analyzing representations of behavior and criteria.

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