Q&A with Michèle Lamont

Q: What inspired you and your colleagues to write *Getting Respect*, and how does it connect to your past scholarship?

Back in 2000, I published a book called *The Dignity of Working Man: Morality and the Boundaries of Race, Class, and Immigration*. It was based on interviews with African American and white workers in New York, and native white workers and North African workers in France. I asked questions about what makes people equal and was surprised to discover that in France workers never talked about money making people equal, whereas many white and black American workers believe that “if I can buy a house, and you can buy a house, we're equal.” There is very little in the literature about “everyday” conceptions of racial inequality. I wanted to get at how people understand similarities and differences and to learn about what kind of thinking racism is based on.

Q: In writing *Getting Respect*, what new insights have you learned about racism in the United States?

One of the main findings is that African Americans use confrontation (speaking up or calling out someone’s behavior) in response to discrimination more frequently than any of the other groups studied—black Brazilians, and Ethiopian Jews, Mizrahim and Arab Palestinian citizens in Israel. Asking why it is that they confront so readily made us understand African Americans through a different lens. We found that black Brazilians confront as well, but they're equally as likely to offer no response.

Among African Americans, offering no response to a discriminatory incident is half as frequent as confronting. So our question became: What are the conditions that legitimize this confrontation in the United States?

Another finding was that African Americans are more likely to “name” racism than the members of other groups. This speaks to how readily available narratives or scripts about group discrimination are in the United States, compared to Israel and Brazil. In contrast, Brazilians were far more hesitant to say that they experienced racism.

Q: How did you select groups for the study?

When we first started, we thought we’d pair black Brazilians, for whom group identity is not that salient, to a group with strong boundaries, Arab Israelis. We weren’t sure where African Americans would fall yet. Then we added the Mizrahim (Jews whose families immigrated to Israel from Iraq and Yemen) and black Ethiopian Jews who are even more recent immigrants. It transformed our project, because now we had two groups who had very strong group identification (African Americans and Arab Israelis, and to some degree, Ethiopian Jews) and two groups with weaker group boundaries (black Brazilians and Mizrahim). So this really brought home the issue of how ‘groupness’ influences the experience of racism.

We found that, because you belong to a strongly bounded group, it doesn’t necessarily mean that you are more confrontational. Although they are “strongly bounded,” Israeli Palestinians living in Israel are not very confrontational because they have no hope of being recognized. They are often viewed as the enemy within, suspected of being allied with Hezbollah or Palestinians living in the occupied territories, and they believe that they cannot win, so are much less likely to speak up.
It is the same with the weakly bounded group, the Mizrahim. They are clearly discriminated by all standards on the labor market and elsewhere, but they often downplay this experience. Rather, they tell stories of how well integrated they are.

**Q: Your book suggests that black Brazilians differ from African Americans in that they don’t zero in on race as a basis for exclusion, but rather on their presumed low socioeconomic status, or poverty.**

That’s the traditional observation about concepts of race in both countries. However, our Brazilian collaborators bring a lot of wrinkles to this story. Their respondents identified themselves as being black, and by blackness they point more to skin color than to a shared culture. In part this is because black Brazilians are a majority group in Brazil. They don’t think they have a distinctive culture because their culture is the majority culture. So that’s a very big difference from how ‘blackness’ is understood in the United States, where our African American interviewees experience their shared identity as having a strong cultural component.

**Q: So, if you want to eliminate segregation based on skin color, wouldn’t the best path be to promote intermarriage? Is this what happened in Brazil?**

Well, that was historically the strategy in Brazil; that’s one of the reasons why group boundaries are so much weaker there. The old ideology of the “mestizo,” which was part of the Brazilian national ideology of racial democracy, aimed to promote intermarriage. Moreover, spatial segregation in Brazil is based more on socioeconomic class than race. In the United States a number of middle-class blacks live in lower-middle-class and working-class black neighborhoods partly out of choice, but also because the spatial racial segregation is extremely strong here.

**Q: How did you select for skin color in Brazil?**

In selecting our black respondents in all three countries we did not take into consideration actual skin color. But we did ask people if they identified themselves as black. In Brazil, we chose people who self-identified as pretos and pardos (black and brown). There are many other words in Brazil that indicate pale blacks (e.g., morenos) and those people were not part of our study. This broad color spectrum is present all over Latin America. They have many categories and words to talk about skin color, many more than we do in the United States, where the ‘one drop’ rule continues to prevail in the minds of many whites.

**Q: You describe the Arab Palestinians in Israel as being the most “excluded” of the groups you studied. Why is this the case?**

The situation for the Arab Palestinians living in Israel today is terrible because they are so clearly segregated as a group. They are excluded from the job market, have separate schools, and many live in small villages separate from the larger society. They are not allowed to serve in the military, which is a known path to upward mobility and social integration. There are very few conditions that would allow them to hope to live by the precept of the Israeli dream, if you will. It’s just not very possible. This makes it harder for them to respond to racism by focusing on individual self-improvement.

**Q: All the groups your team interviewed experienced unfair treatment and responded in different ways. One type of response you label “individualistic.” Can you explain what this means?**
It means “pull yourself up by your bootstraps,” “work harder,” “get your education,” “be upwardly mobile,” et cetera. It’s the individual’s behavior that’s considered a determinant for success. A more collectivist response is oriented toward social change, as illustrated by the amazing outcomes of the civil rights movement in the United States, where people agitated and lobbied and actually changed the law. In our interviews, when we asked, “What are the best tools that your group has had at its disposal to improve its situation?” the majority talk about individualistic solutions. And the group that most frequently answered this way was the African Americans, second were Ethiopian Jews, then Mizrahim.

The individualistic response implies: “Don't blame other people and don’t blame racism. You should do your thing and try to be upwardly mobile.” African Americans all experience discrimination; it’s very much part of their daily lives. But at the same time a large number think the solution is not necessarily to moan and to decry injustice, but to try to create the conditions for personal advancement. This response is particularly present in the United States, but also among the Mizrahim and Ethiopian Jews, despite neoliberalism being more influential on this side of the pond than in Israel.

**Q: Because African Americans have the cultural history of the civil rights movement, wouldn’t you expect them to say collective mobilization is the best tool for their group?**

There's a real tension there because the great gains of the 1960s were achieved through collective mobilization and have come to be largely taken for granted, even if some are contested at the level of the United States Supreme Court. But at the same time the generations that we interviewed had a lot of experience being told that to blame racism is to make excuses. And we all know that many white people decry reverse racism. Therefore a number of our African American respondents believed there's only so much you can gain by denouncing injustice. It's in line with the American dream, the main tenets of which are if you work hard you will “make it,” and that's how you gain social membership. So that's the sacred value of this society—not all societies are organized around the same notions.

In addition, neoliberalism has had a much greater impact in the United States than it has in Israel and Brazil. And by neoliberalism I mean the idea that market mechanisms should guide all forms of social arrangements, government should remove barriers to the circulation of goods and people, limit the impact of unions, et cetera. This is connected to the widespread notion that our value as human beings is tied to how successful or competitive we are. Such views may seem quite absurd outside the United States, whereas here they are largely taken for granted by a huge portion of the American population.

**Q: You found that intergroup relationships were quite different in the United States compared to Brazil.**

In Brazil the dominant myth is that of racial democracy, and there's a strong emphasis put on racial coexistence. My collaborators found that many of their interviewees believe that being in people’s faces confronting racism all the time is an antisocial behavior that is very destructive to society. They prefer to gently “educate the ignorant.” Even as we were putting our interview schedule together, this affected which questions we could ask. In the United States one of our questions was, “Do you have friends of another racial group?” which is an obvious question to ask. And surveys show that roughly 75 percent of Americans don't. My Brazilian collaborators argued that we could not ask this very same question in Brazil as our respondents would view it as a deeply insulting question. Most people there have friends from a range of racial groups. This is based not only on
preference but is also tied to one’s chances of meeting people from other racial groups in their neighborhood, at work, and in public spaces.

**Q: Is there anything in your personal background that drew you to the study of inequality?**

I am a Québécois, and I grew up during the peak of the nationalist movement there, a time when we saw massive political mobilization, and at the cultural level, assemblies with folk singers and people working to celebrate and transform Québécois identity. And having worked with a number of African American students, I was taken by the many similarities in the quest for equality across national contexts—even though in Québec, of course, the stigma is language and culture, whereas in the United States it's skin color.

After the English conquest, the French population was controlled by a small French Canadian elite made up of members of the liberal professions (doctors, lawyers, professors). The majority of the French population was not educated—they were farmers and blue collar workers. The English Canadians had a strong sense of their superiority over the colonials, and the French, of course, fed that as well. The Québec movement for independence turned out to be an important and very successful social movement aimed at transforming both intergroup power relations and the meaning associated with being Québécois. I was born in 1957, so my youth was shaped by this social mobilization. It is interesting to me that while anticolonial and antiracist discourse about Latinos and blacks are widely available in the United States, such is not the case for French Québécois identity.

**Q: What impact do you hope Getting Respect will have?**

The book should make it more obvious what stigmatization is about. It argues that stigmatization is a crucial dimension of inequality that is often ignored, as economists and sociologists so often focus on the distribution of resources. People experience stigmatization deeply and it affects their sense of self, certainly as much as does being deprived of resources. I think that claims for recognition should be taken very seriously by policy makers and social scientists. We have yet to understand how inequality and stigmatization articulate with one another.

Policy makers of all kinds should be much more attuned to how the policies (such as welfare) and laws (such as gay marriage) they pass can be stigmatizing or destigmatizing. It’s also important to think carefully about each form of redistribution both in terms of impact on material resources and also in terms of construction of the self. My hope is that by reading this book, white people—and other nonminority members—will gain a much better understanding of the wear and tear that comes with living as the nonmember of the dominant group. It’s important to realize that dealing with this kind of challenge and assault on your worth all the time takes a toll. And if we look at massive racial disparities in health in this country, that foundations like Robert Wood Johnson have documented and addressed, our book is totally in conversation with the agenda they are setting—by looking at the daily experience and cost of dealing with exclusion on people’s lives.

**Q: Reflecting on your decades of work on inequality, can you draw conclusions about which social or institutional conditions lead to more equitable societies?**

How do you achieve a society that is equitable? Well, the classic approach has to do with the politics of recognition and redistribution. Take the Nordic response for example—let’s have a strong state that taxes the more wealthy people and redistributes resources. That works very well for Nordic societies, which have oil money and all kinds of other resources, and historically have had a
fairly homogeneous population. But it doesn't work across the board.

Another response is the politics of recognition. Canada and to a lesser extent the United States do this better than other countries, by proclaiming very loudly that diversity is a strength and resource, and that it is something that we value as a society. Many societies don't do this as well (France to name only one example). Through this message of diversity, those countries have achieved greater equality through the legal process for women, people of color, and other groups. The rapid legalization of gay marriage stands out particularly starkly.

Q: It sounds like you believe collective movements are the most successful way to effect change.

In the United States, there's no doubt that the determinant of social change is the fact that Americans can activate the legal process to redefine rules of coexistence for greater social justice. This is how they have imposed new rules on people who were resistant (e.g., Southerners who refused racial desegregation in schools). And this has been extremely powerful over time, but it also has many limitations.

In the French context there's been far more resistance to recognizing diversity by the state. In contrast to the United States, France promotes secularism to reject any form of expression of religious identity in public life. The recent incidents with the government’s attempt to ban burkinis (a full body unitard that Muslim women wear at the beach) are constant reminders to minority Muslim groups that they have to lend themselves to the rules of the majority, which is quite different than what we're experiencing in the United States.

In Canada, the ideology of multiculturalism has had a very positive impact in pushing immigrants to be much more emotionally and cognitively invested in their society, and even to run for political office. Today, Trudeau has a number of Muslims in his cabinet, which is quite different from the American political context.

So, I believe we can create inclusion in the context of the law, through narratives, through social policy, and by using institutional tools and cultural repertoires together to create shared notions of solidarity. In some ways it starts at the top, but then change is also produced by ordinary people responding to racism. Does a country create a climate for people to organize and to be heard? That is the crucial question.

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